

THE MOTHER

By Karel Čapek

MASARYK ON THOUGHT AND LIFE

Conversations with Karel Čapek

PRESIDENT MASARYK TELLS HIS STORY

Recounted by Karel Čapek

(Second Impression)

INTIMATE THINGS

(Second Impression)

THE GARDENER'S YEAR

(Ninth Impression)

FAIRY TALES

(Second Impression)

DASHENKA

The Life of a Puppy

(Second Impression)

TRAVELS IN THE NORTH

(Third Impression)

Novels

HORDUBAL

METEOR

AN ORDINARY LIFE

WAR WITH THE NEWTS

(Second Impression)

THE FIRST RESCUE PARTY

Plays

POWER AND GLORY

(Second Impression)

THE MOTHER

With Josef Čapek

ADAM THE CREATOR

KAREL ČAPEK

THE MOTHER

A Play in Three Acts

Authorized English

Version by

Paul Selver

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Mother

The Father

Andrew

George

Christopher

Peter

Tony

The Old Gentleman

Man's Voice in Loud-speaker

Woman's Voice in Loud-speaker

This play, the idea for which the author was given by his wife, the subject-matter by the age in which we are living, and the final inspiration by a picture of a widow kneeling on one of today's battlefields, will perhaps pass muster without any introduction to explain its meaning more fully. As regards the actual stage-setting, however, the author is anxious that the dead who group themselves round the mother in his play should not be regarded as ghosts, but as living people, capable of friendliness and attachment, taking their places in a completely natural manner within the family circle which was their former home. They are just the same as when alive, for they continue to live in their mother's thoughts. They are dead only inasmuch as she can no longer embrace them and they make slightly less noise than we who are alive.

ACT I

[THE FATHER'S room, with the windows wide open. THE FATHER'S portrait in officer's uniform hangs on the main wall, together with rapiers, swords, pistols, and rifles, Turkish pipes, relics of colonial expeditions, such as spears and shields, bows, arrows and yataghans, antlers, skulls of antelopes and other hunting trophies. The other walls are occupied with bookcases and carved cabinets, a rack containing a set of well-polished rifles, Oriental tapestries, maps, and skins of animals. Altogether the room is overcrowded with masculine lumber: there is a solid writing-table, and on it are dictionaries, a globe, pipes, paper-weights made of shrapnel, tobacco-jars, and such-like odds and ends; there is a sofa with Turkish cushions, shabby armchairs and tabourettes, a small Arabian table with a chess-board, another small table with a portable gramophone. On top of the cabinet are military caps and helmets, and scattered about, here and there, specimens of exotic sculpture, negro masks, and the kind of things which people used to bring back as souvenirs from pleasure-trips and the colonies. But everything at once strikes the eye as being very threadbare and out of date. The place looks more like a private museum than a living-room.]

TONY is squatting on the sofa with his knees beneath his chin. Propped on his heels is a large book serving as a desk for the sheet of paper on which he is writing. He reads in a whisper what he has written, and marks the rhythm with a movement of his hand; he shakes his head, scratches something out, and silently goes on testing the scansion.

[Enter PETER whistling.]

PETER. Hallo, Tony, what are you up to?

[Walks rather aimlessly towards the writing-table and whistles a tune to himself as he twirls the globe round.]

THE MOTHER

TONY. Eh?

PETER. Are you writing poetry?

TONY. Of course not. [*Slips the sheet of paper into the book*]
What's it matter to you, anyway?

PETER. Nothing. [*Shoves his hands into his pockets and goes on whistling to himself as he looks at TONY*] Come along, let's see what it is.

TONY. [*Pretends to be reading*] Oh, shut up. I haven't got anything.

PETER. Bah! [*Tugs at TONY's hair*] All right, keep it to yourself, you young— [*Strolls up to the writing-table and fills his pipe from one of the jars*] I suppose you can't find anything better to do, eh?

[*Opens a drawer.*]

TONY. And what do you think you're doing?

PETER. Oh, just lounging about, Tony. [*Takes a dog's-eared book out of a drawer and turns over the pages*] I'm just frenziedly lounging about. You see, my hour hasn't struck yet. [*Walks up to the table with the chess-board*] Look here, Dad started to work out this chess problem and doesn't seem to have finished it. I ought to see if I can do it some time.

[*Arranges a few black and white chess-men on the board and compares their position with a diagram in the book, whistling softly to himself the while.*]

TONY. [*Hesitantly*] I say, Peter, there's something I wanted to ask you—

PETER. [*Absent-mindedly*] Eh?

TONY. It's about George.

PETER. What am I supposed to know?

TONY. Isn't he trying for some record or other to-day?

PETER. What makes you think so?

TONY. Yesterday evening he asked me to think of him and wish him luck to-day, because he was having a shot at something. About three o'clock, he said.

PETER. About three o'clock? [*Looks at his watch*] Why,

THE MOTHER

it's close on three now. He didn't tell us anything about it. [*Goes on arraying the chess-men, still whistling to himself*] I suppose he didn't want Mother to know. She's always so scared when George does any flying. Don't mention it in front of her, whatever you do. [*Looks first at the book and then at the chess-board*] D5. D5. Dad's got D5 marked here as the first move, but it doesn't look to me as if—— You know, Tony, I can't help thinking that Dad must have felt a bit bored sometimes in the colonies. I expect that's why he used to work out chess problems.

TONY. Are you bored too?

PETER. Bored isn't the word for it. This must be the dulllest age that ever was. [*Turning round*] Look here, Tony, stop fooling and show me the poem.

TONY. Not likely. For one thing it's not finished yet.

PETER. [*Going towards him*] Come along, there's a good chap.

TONY. [*Producing the sheet of paper*] Yes, but if I've made a mess of it, you'll nag me no end.

PETER. [*Taking the paper from him*] I only want to see if there are any spelling mistakes.

[*Reads the poem to himself with close attention.*]

[*Enter CHRISTOPHER with a rifle.*]

CHRISTOPHER. So this is where you are, the two of you? [*Clicking the safety-catch of the rifle*] I had to take the damned thing to pieces, but it works a regular treat now. [*Puts the rifle into the rack*] We ought to give it a try-out, Peter. Well, chaps, what's on?

[*Takes another rifle from the rack and tests the safety-catch.*]

TONY. [*Looking anxiously at Peter*] Nothing much.

PETER. Look here, Tony, you've got two syllables too many in this line.

TONY. Which line is that? Let's see.

PETER. The one beginning: "*But Thou, O Fair Unknown, yet comest——*"

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. [*Blowing on the safety-catch*] Hallo, poetry? Tony's hard up for rhymes again, eh?

[*He lays the rifle on the table, and takes oil and tow from the drawer.*]

PETER. And who's the Fair Unknown?

TONY. [*Jumping up and trying to snatch the paper away from him*] Give me that! I know I made a hash of it. Chuck it over here and I'll burn it.

PETER. But I really want to know. Don't act the fool, Tony. As a matter of fact, I don't mind telling you that this poem's not at all bad.

TONY. You really mean it?

PETER. [*Reading to himself*] Rather! It sounds pretty good to me. You're quite a budding poet laureate.

TONY. Then surely you can realize for yourself who the Fair Unknown is.

PETER. I suppose you mean death.

[*Gives him back the paper.*]

TONY. Well, why do you ask, if you see the point of it?

PETER. Oh, I was only rather wondering why you refer to death like that. After all, you're only quite a kid.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Cleaning the rifle on the writing-table*] My dear chap, it's just because he's only a kid. He's got growing pains. The Fair Unknown—don't make me laugh! Blowed if I can see anything like that about death, except perhaps—

PETER. — except perhaps death in a worthy cause.

CHRISTOPHER. Right you are, my boy, very nicely put. For example, here's a red rag on a pole. That'd be a worthy cause, wouldn't it? Death on the barricades—Peter couldn't let it go any cheaper than that, eh?

TONY. [*In a tone of voice which is almost tearful*] Stop it! You'll be going for each other again.

PETER. [*Sitting down by the chess-board*]. No we won't, old chap. I, for one, wouldn't dream of it. Who'd bother to listen to any remarks from this cantankerous hide-bound

THE MOTHER

old fogey? Still, what can you expect? He was born half an hour before I was. That, my boy, is the great gulf fixed between one generation and another. But time marches on and nothing can stop it. A new generation, half an hour younger than the previous one, is arriving on the scene. [*Moves a chess-man*] D5. D5. Unless I'm mistaken, that won't be quite as successful a gambit as Dad fancied.

[*Moves the chess-man back.*]

CHRISTOPHER. Won't you show me your poem, Tony?

TONY. I'd have to polish it up a bit first.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Wiping his fingers on the tow*] Leave it as it is. The more you try to smarten the thing up, the worse it gets.

TONY. [*Gives him the paper*] But you mustn't make fun of me, Christopher.

PETER. [*At the chess-board*] Don't you worry. Christopher never makes fun of anything. He'll only examine it closely to see whether it shows signs of any Bolshevik tendencies, such as free verse.

TONY. But it isn't in free verse.

PETER. Lucky for you, Tony. Otherwise Christopher would denounce you as a traitor to your country. You mustn't try to upset the established order. Leave that to me. I'm the black sheep of the family. Suppose I were to move this bishop? [*Shakes his head*] No, that'd mean uncovering my inner defences and white would launch a direct attack on them. Wait a bit. *But Thou, O Fair Unknown, yet comest*——

TONY. Let Christopher read it.

PETER. Sorry, I was thinking aloud. That's what comes of having the gift of the gab.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Puts the paper down*] Appalling!

TONY. Bad as all that?

CHRISTOPHER. Excruciating. Peter, this kid's going to be a poet. And this is an officer's family, too, of unblemished reputation. Don't you think I ought to give him a good hiding?

THE MOTHER

TONY. [*Delighted*] Do you really like it?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Playfully pulling his hair*] Well, you've got a good deal to learn yet, Tony. And take my tip and leave death alone. It's no subject for a kid like you. If you want to write poetry about something, why not have a go at life?

TONY. Then you think I ought to go on writing?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Again cleaning the rifle*] Well, you know, in our family everyone's got a different fad. A sort of family curse, I suppose.

PETER. Do you know that George is having a shot at a record to-day?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Stops cleaning the rifle*] Who said so?

PETER. Tony. He said he had it from George himself.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Looking out of the window*] He's got fine weather for it. Let's hope he has a bit of luck.

TONY. What sort of record is it?

PETER. Altitude.

CHRISTOPHER. With a load.

[*Bending over his rifle again.*]

TONY. It must be terrifically exciting to fly at such a height that you can see only blue sky, and then to struggle up even higher for all you're worth.

PETER. Yes, and you must feel the cold pretty badly, especially your hands.

CHRISTOPHER. I'll bet you what you like that George breaks the record one of these days. He takes after Dad.

TONY. In what way?

PETER. [*Engrossed in the chess problem*] Pluck.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Still busy with the gun*] Sense of duty, Peter.

TONY. You at least had a chance of knowing Dad. I wish I could have. Did Andrew take after him too?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes. That's why he went abroad.

TONY. And what about you?

CHRISTOPHER. I try to, Tony. I do my best.

TONY. And what about Peter?

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. He tries damned hard to take after him less than any of us.

PETER. Me? My dear fellow, I try damned hard to work out chess problems.

CHRISTOPHER. Well, that's as may be, but as far as everything else is concerned—what a nasty shock it would be for poor old Dad. A major in the artillery, and here's a son of his anxious to turn the world upside down. A regular family tragedy. I wonder why it is that these rifles of Dad's rust so quickly?

PETER. Don't take any notice of him, my boy. Dad was always to be found where things were on the move. That's how I take after him. [*Makes a move on the chess-board*] That's why the red pawn advances to F4. White is on the defensive.

CHRISTOPHER. White on the defensive. Let's see.

[*Walks over to the chess-board.*]

PETER. Red proceeds to attack. White loses ground.

CHRISTOPHER. [*At the chess-board*] I say, Peter, that's not fair. Dad would have moved that knight to D5. And if the knight moved to D5—

PETER. Don't interfere with my game.

CHRISTOPHER. It's Dad's game. Look here, with D5 white can mate in the third move.

PETER. But that's just what I don't want, my dear fellow. I want white to be beaten. That's why the red pawn will mount the barricade and drive away the white knight.

CHRISTOPHER. By Jove, there's something wrong with the problem, then. The man who set it never took that possibility into account.

PETER. Of course. The problem can be solved in two ways, my dear sir.

CHRISTOPHER. The first is Dad's way.

PETER. And the second is the way of revolution. Forward, the downtrodden pawns! The white castle is threatened. Check!

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. I say, Peter, move that red pawn back. You'll spoil the whole game like that.

PETER. Which game?

CHRISTOPHER. Dad's, of course. Dad would have moved to D5. Move that pawn back.

PETER. What for?

CHRISTOPHER. I'd like to see how Dad would have finished the game.

PETER. This isn't Dad's game that's being played now. It's a different one. This is ours. It's no use, white knight. Nothing that you can do will stop that red pawn from advancing. At the fourth move he'll turn into a high-and-mighty queen—but we've got a different name for that?

CHRISTOPHER. What do *you* call it?

PETER. [*Suddenly growing serious*] A new government, my dear chap. The government of the reds. We shall have it pretty soon now.

CHRISTOPHER. I should say not, Peter. There's one more move left.

PETER. What is it?

CHRISTOPHER. This.

[*Knocks all the chess-men over.*]

PETER. Ah. that's called the method of brute force. [*Stands up*] All right, then. We'll find another way of settling this between us.

TONY. [*Who has been reading on the sofa, raises his head and shouts in an overwrought manner*] For goodness' sake, do give politics a rest. I can't stand it.

CHRISTOPHER. Don't beso touchy. We're only larking about. Just having a bit of a friendly scrimmage, aren't we, Peter?

TONY. You're not larking about. I know what's passing through your minds.

PETER. You're right, Tony. We're in dead earnest. This is the struggle between the old world and the new. But don't you worry, I'll settle his hash for him.

[*Pulls a savage headdress from the wall and puts it on.*]

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. [*Donning a cavalry helmet*] Come along, then. [*Takes two rapiers from the wall*] Choose your weapon, Sir.

PETER. [*Bending one of the rapiers*] That's fine! [*Both stand on guard*] You take charge, Tony.

TONY. [*Burying his head in the book and putting his fingers in his ears*] I can't stand it, I tell you.

CHRISTOPHER. Ready—go!

[*Both start a sham fencing bout, with appropriate cries.*]

PETER. Down with all tyrants and traitors!

CHRISTOPHER. Ha!

PETER. First blood!

CHRISTOPHER. The shoulder. Only a flesh wound, that's all! [*A ding-dong struggle continues.*]

PETER. And it'll end with us on top.

CHRISTOPHER. You on top; wait and see if it will. *Touché.*

PETER. A mere scratch! On with the fight! Never say die!

CHRISTOPHER. You'll never get at me!

PETER. This the beginning of the end, *Toccato!*

CHRISTOPHER. You, not me! [*Pauses*] I say, Peter, did that hurt?

PETER. Of course not. *En garde!* [*The tabourets and small tables are tipped over*] *La.*

CHRISTOPHER. *Ala.*

PETER. Stop! That would have been a vein in the neck, Christopher. You're dead.

CHRISTOPHER. He is wounded, but fights on! To the last breath! *Ala.*

TONY. [*Shouts*] Shut up, will you!

PETER. Shan't be long now, Tony. The pawn attacks. Ha! Ha! The old world's toppling over——

CHRISTOPHER. *Finito!* That got you right through the heart, Peter.

[*Lowers his rapier.*]

PETER. [*Salutes with rapier*] Thanks, I'm dead.

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. [*Salutes with rapier*] Sorry, old boy.

PETER. But red pawns by the thousand will rally behind me—— Hurrah, comrades!

[*Enter THE MOTHER and stands in the doorway.*]

THE MOTHER. Boys, boys, what *are* you doing?

PETER. Sorry, Mother. [*Quickly hangs the rapier on the wall*] Christopher has just killed me, Mum. Right through the heart.

[*Takes off the helmet.*]

THE MOTHER. Why is it that you two twins always have to be wrangling? And look at the mess you've made here again, you bad boys. Daddy's room, too!

PETER. We'll tidy it up again, Mum, don't you worry. Come along, Christopher.

[*They hastily put things straight, picking up the tables and tabourets that have been overturned.*]

THE MOTHER. Leave it as it is. I know your tidying up. The more you tidy up, the worse it gets.

CHRISTOPHER. [*On all fours, putting the carpet straight*] Right you are, Mum. Stop it, Peter.

PETER. [*Also on all fours, pushes him aside*] Stop it yourself.

[*In an instant they are at grips, rolling on the floor.*]

PETER. You'll get it hot, my boy.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Panting*] You try it, that's all.

PETER. Just you wait.

[*They roll about on the floor.*]

THE MOTHER. That's enough now! One of these days you'll smash everything to pieces here. I wonder you're not ashamed of yourselves, at your age, too. Whatever will Tony think of you?

PETER. [*Letting go of CHRISTOPHER*] Come along, Tony, I'll show you how it's done, too.

TONY. No, thanks!

THE MOTHER. Tony doesn't want to. And now make yourselves scarce here. Tony, what made them go for each other?

THE MOTHER

TONY. Peter wouldn't move to D5.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Collecting the chess-men on the floor*] You see, Mum, that was Dad's move. I was only standing up for the family tradition.

PETER. It isn't true, Mum. There were two ways of working out the problem.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Arranging the chess-men on the board*] Then why not play it as Dad used to?

PETER. Why not play it the other way? I expect that Dad would play it now the same as I do.

THE MOTHER. Come, come, stop arguing and clear out of here. I shall have to tidy up after you, you good-for-nothing young rascals.

CHRISTOPHER. We'll help you, Mum.

THE MOTHER. A lot of help you'd be! I don't believe you even know what tidying up means.

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, it's putting things where they were.

PETER. It's putting things where they ought to be.

MOTHER. Oh, dear no! It's putting things where they feel cosy. But you wouldn't understand that. Now come along, you two, and clear out of here.

CHRISTOPHER. Let's go into the garden and try that rifle, Peter.

PETER. All right! We'll see who can hit a bottle at fifty yards, eh?

THE MOTHER. Why do you always have to be smashing something?

CHRISTOPHER. Coming, Tony?

[*He takes from the rack the same rifle as he brought with him.*]

THE MOTHER. No, Tony isn't fond of shooting, are you, Tony?

PETER. Tony's afraid, that's what it is.

THE MOTHER. No, he's not. You don't understand him. He's different from you, that's all.

CHRISTOPHER. We're all different, Mother.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Not so much as you think. And now get along with you, you big scamps.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Kissing her cheek*] Are you still angry?

PETER. [*Kissing her other cheek*] What, Mother angry? She's used to it by now.

THE MOTHER. Do you know where George has got to?

CHRISTOPHER. No, where should he be? Do you know, Tony?

TONY. He said—er, he said something about a meeting.

THE MOTHER. Who with?

PETER. I expect with some fair unknown, Mum.

[*The two brothers jostle each other out of the room.*]

THE MOTHER. And what were you doing here, Tony?

TONY. Nothing. I was only reading.

THE MOTHER. One of Dad's books?

TONY. Yes, a book of travels, Mum.

THE MOTHER. You're always thinking about far-away countries. That's no use to you, Tony. You'll never go on any long journey, will you?

[*Walks across the room and quietly tidies up.*]

TONY. Perhaps not, but, you know, I can imagine so well what it's like there——

THE MOTHER. Where?

TONY. Well, I don't quite know. But I can sort of see a large plain covered with high grass and suddenly there's a herd of antelopes—I don't understand how anyone can shoot animals.

THE MOTHER. Dad used to shoot them, but you won't be like that, will you? [*Putting her arm round his neck*] I should like you to be always just as you are now. Somebody has to stay at home, Tony. Otherwise there wouldn't be any home at all, would there? [*Kisses him*] And now run along, I've got work to do here.

[*Exit TONY.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Noiselessly putting things straight*] Tony will be different. Tony must be different. [*Stands in front of THE*

THE MOTHER

FATHER's portrait and looks at it. Shrugs her shoulders and goes to draw the heavy curtains. Semi-darkness fills the room. THE MOTHER goes back to THE FATHER's portrait and lights a lamp which stands in front of it] Why do you keep drawing them towards you? You know I don't like it. Even Tony, who never saw you, lingers here whenever he can. Why do you treat me like that, Richard? I don't want them to be always drifting towards you.

THE FATHER. [*Advances slowly from the dark corner; he is wearing the same uniform as in the portrait*] I don't draw them towards me, darling. They come of their own accord. You know how they've liked playing with this lumber here, ever since they were children. You must not be surprised at what they do.

THE MOTHER. [*Turns to him without the slightest sign of astonishment*] That's what you always say, my dear. But now they're rather too big for these playthings of yours and yet they still come to you.

THE FATHER. Why, that's because of childhood memories. But you might just as well have got rid of these oddments. What about that?

THE MOTHER. Get rid of things that belonged to you? No, Richard, I have a right to them, it's for me that they are here. [*Sits down in the armchair*] And when the boys have been in here, they always seem to leave something behind them which makes me think that it was you.

THE FATHER. [*Sitting astride a chair*] Oh, that's only tobacco, darling.

THE MOTHER. Oh, it's something more alive than tobacco. I only have to shut my eyes and a terribly strong feeling comes over me. Richard used to be here, Richard—Richard—— The place is still full of you. Don't say it's the old lumber that's been left. It's you. It's you. You're spoiling my boys for me, Richard.

THE FATHER. Don't be silly, how on earth could I spoil them? Once a man's—— How long ago is it?

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. You ought to know. Seventeen years.

THE FATHER. As long as all that? Well, there you are, when a man's been dead for seventeen whole years, there's precious little left of him, darling. And what little there is gets less and less.

THE MOTHER. That doesn't matter. You lure them. That's why they're always coming in here. It appeals to them when they remember that their father was a soldier and a hero. I know what a spell it casts on them. It always did.

THE FATHER. You shouldn't have told them about me, my dear girl. That was a mistake on your part.

THE MOTHER. I shouldn't have told them! That's a fine thing for you to say. Who else was there to keep your memory alive, if I didn't do it? Since you died, Richard, I've had little enjoyment out of life except your memory and the children. I know how much I have to thank you for, dearest. There aren't many children who have cause to be so proud of their father. You've no idea what that meant to our boys. Surely you're not going to say that I should have robbed them of it.

THE FATHER. You're exaggerating, my dear. Please don't be offended if I say that you always did exaggerate on this particular subject. I wasn't much of a hero. My exploits didn't amount to a great deal, you know. A paltry brush with the natives, and we didn't even get the best of it.

THE MOTHER. Yes, that's what you always say. But your commanding officer wrote and told me that I was entitled to mourn for a hero. "Your husband volunteered for a most dangerous . . ."

THE FATHER. My dear girl, that's just empty talk. That was probably their way of trying to break the news gently to you. Hero, forsooth! Somebody had to do the job. If I hadn't volunteered for it, somebody else would have. That's the whole thing in a nutshell.

THE MOTHER. Yes, but perhaps the other man wouldn't have been the father of five children, Richard.

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. Possibly not, but it doesn't follow that a man need be a bad soldier just because he has five children. As I say, I didn't do anything out of the way. But you can hardly be expected to understand that, dear. You see, in the thick of the fighting, we're apt to take a different view of things. It's hard to explain, but what I mean is that what people call an act of conspicuous gallantry and so on, seems just a matter of course when it comes to the point. It's just a part of the job and it's got to be done. That flank simply had to be covered, that was all. You see, this is what happened: the main column was advancing here, and over there, the flank, was a mountain pass which we had to hold with a small detachment. That's all. Only fifty-two got killed, all told. Nothing of any consequence.

THE MOTHER. Fifty-two got killed, out of how many?

THE FATHER. Why, out of fifty-two, 'dearest, but we held out for six whole days. I don't mind telling you that the most unpleasant part of the business was the thirst we had to put up with. You see, we hadn't any water. The thirst was pretty awful. And on top of that I was mad with rage.

THE MOTHER. Why?

THE FATHER. Because it was really quite unnecessary. You see, the Colonel had blundered. The main column ought to have waited down below, and they ought to have sent at least two battalions to hold the pass. And a mountain battery as well. I knew that beforehand. I told the Colonel as much and all he said was: "It looks to me, Major, as though you've got cold feet."

THE MOTHER. And is that why you went to your death, Richard?

THE FATHER. Chiefly because of that, darling, chiefly because of that. I wanted to show the Colonel that I was right, you see. What a jackass he was. Fancy letting the natives fool him like that.

THE MOTHER. And just on his account . . . on his account. . . .

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. I suppose it seems absurd to you. But in the army it comes under the heading of honour, and that rules out any other course of action.

THE MOTHER. Richard, you've never told me that before! Then you were killed because the Colonel gave a wrong order?

THE FATHER. It sometimes happens like that, dear. But, at any rate, it only showed I was right. And that was worth it.

THE MOTHER. So that was all you thought about, to show that you were right. You didn't think about us, did you? You didn't take the trouble to think that I was expecting a baby.

THE FATHER. Of course I did, darling, I couldn't help thinking about it. You've no idea of how a man thinks of all that when he is in a tight corner. For instance, he's riding along on horseback and says to himself: In three months' time I may be home. By then the baby'll be born. I shall have to be very careful how I leave my sword in the entrance hall and then walk along on tip-toe . . . walk on tip-toe. . . . Why, I expect young Andrew will give me a correct military salute. And then there's George. I expect he'll show me some gadget or other of his. And the twins'll have a fight to see which of them's going to scramble on to my lap first. Come along, you young scamp, there's room for both of you, only for goodness' sake stop squabbling. And my wife. It's more than six months since I last saw her. More than six months. When I take her into my arms, I wonder whether she'll sort of melt as if she hadn't any bones in her body, and softly sigh: Richard. . . . [*Standing up*] Well, darling, and how have you been all this time?

THE MOTHER. [*Closing her eyes*] Why, darling, I've been waiting for you, of course. I've borne you another son. He's a delicate little fellow. Goodness knows why he's so fragile. Perhaps because I used to weep so much for you.

THE FATHER: He'll grow out of that, dear. He'll be a

fine strong chap in time, like the others, he'll be a regular hero, you'll see.

THE MOTHER. [*In sudden irritation*] No, I don't want Tony to be a hero. I've had enough of that, Richard, I can tell you. This hero business of yours has cost me quite enough, as it is. Haven't I lost you because of it? Do you realize what it means for a woman to lose her husband? If you only knew how little of me was left when you had gone. How could you treat me like that and let yourself be killed for no reason at all?

THE FATHER. I couldn't help it, darling, but when that wretched Colonel said I had cold feet—why, there was nothing else I could do but go, was there? And he said it in front of the other officers too. "It looks to me, Major, as if you've got cold feet." I wonder, darling, what you'd have said to me if you'd been standing there at the time.

THE MOTHER. [*Standing up, in a low voice*] I should have said: "You must go, Richard. You can't let him talk to you like that."

THE FATHER. You see, darling, you'd have felt the same about it as I did.

THE MOTHER. Yes, because I loved you, Richard, because I have to keep on loving you. But you mustn't take any notice of that, darling. You didn't realize what it means for a woman when she loves someone in her womanish way with a complete lack of reason. I myself don't know what there is in us which makes us act like that. I only know what it was about you that took my fancy so tremendously—your soldierly manner, Richard, the rattling of your spurs, your courage and swagger, your sense of honour and your free-and-easy ways. I don't know why I adored that in you so much. Perhaps I was silly. I was in love, I was crazy; but not even now, no, not even now would I bear the thought that something had made you look cheap.

THE FATHER. There you are, then; and if I hadn't gone then . . .

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. No, no, Richard, you mustn't take me so literally. Perhaps—certainly I would have managed to get over it if you hadn't behaved at the last like a soldier. You'd have come back to me and the children, and you'd have left the army. I would have got used to it. And I should have been just as fond of you. Perhaps in rather a different way. I know that you'd have suffered terribly without your military honour, but we should have got over that, both of us. I would have at least had you with me, Richard, and I could have looked after you——

THE FATHER. Yes, I'd have been a man with nothing to live for but to fret about the past. Would that have satisfied you, darling?

THE MOTHER. It would have had to satisfy me. Don't forget that, even as things were, I had to be satisfied with very little.

THE FATHER. I know, darling. I'm terribly sorry. A major's widow gets a wretchedly small pension——

THE MOTHER. There were five children, Richard, and look at them now. You've no idea what that means for a woman all by herself. No, that's another thing you can't be expected to understand. Forgive me, darling, I oughtn't to have mentioned the subject, but you can't realize—clothes, food, school fees and more clothes, food, school fees. Always struggling to make both ends meet, always having to look twice at every penny—— But what can you possibly know of that? Of course, there's nothing heroic about it, but it has to be done, just the same as the duty you did. Darling, why are you looking at me like that? You see what I've been reduced to.

THE FATHER. You're beautiful, darling. More beautiful than you used to me.

THE MOTHER. Don't be silly, Richard. We who are alive change dreadfully. You're not changed in the slightest. It makes me quite ashamed to feel so old compared with you.

THE MOTHER

You mustn't look at me, darling, I've had too many worries. Life was hard without you . . .

THE FATHER. But, darling, I was of such little use to you.

THE MOTHER. When you were alive, I had at least the satisfaction of knowing that I was not alone. And I missed you most of all when the children began to get out of hand. Don't misunderstand me. They were good boys. Andrew, George, and the twins, they would all do anything for me. But as they grew up, they began to speak a language which was somehow strange to me. I don't properly understand them, Richard. I expect you'd understand them better.

THE FATHER. I'm not so sure, darling, I'm not so sure. I'm afraid they'd be a bit of a puzzle to me, too. I know nothing whatever about medicine or aeroplanes or all that nonsense that the twins have taken up with.

THE MOTHER. You mean politics?

THE FATHER. Yes. It's beyond me, darling. I was just a plain soldier.

THE MOTHER. They think a lot of you, just the same. I know that you wanted them to be soldiers, but when you got killed, I decided otherwise. I could have had them educated for nothing at the military academy, but I preferred to go out and work, so that I could afford to pay for their schooling elsewhere. I wanted them to study medicine or engineering or anything else except soldiering. I wanted them to do something useful, something which they could do without getting killed. If you only knew the sacrifices I made so that I could send them to the proper schools. And now you can see for yourself how they've turned out.

THE FATHER. Why, darling, I think you have every reason to be satisfied with them, haven't you?

THE MOTHER. I'm not really sure. I feel like a hen who has hatched eagles. Sometimes I try to persuade myself that I mustn't be so petty-minded and that I mustn't stand in their way. Richard, it's dreadful how a woman's whole nature changes when she's a mother. Why, there was a

THE MOTHER

time when I used to have foolish ideas and felt as conceited as could be. You remember, don't you, Richard?

THE FATHER. Yes, darling.

THE MOTHER. Why, I ran away from home to be with you. I didn't care what happened. I'd have given up my life, if I'd been asked to. And now all I want to do is to guard like a miser what is left of my life and to keep it all for myself. I've given away enough, Richard. First you and then Andrew. I can't be expected to give any more. I've had to pay too heavy a price for what is called heroism. First you and then Andrew. . . .

THE FATHER. Never mind, darling. Andrew died a splendid death, a splendid and honourable death.

THE MOTHER. I know it was honourable. You think it's most honourable to die for something, But it never occurs to you that when you die, you leave someone behind. Perhaps you had to get killed, Richard, because, after all, you were a soldier. But Andrew didn't have to. Andrew was a doctor and a research-worker. He might have been working at some clinic. He needn't have caught an infection.

THE FATHER. That happens to doctors sometimes, darling. One of our regimental doctors died that way. A nice fellow he was, too; I used to play chess with him. And, just imagine, all of a sudden he caught cholera . . .

THE MOTHER. But Andrew needn't have volunteered for service in the colonies. That was your doing.

THE FATHER. But, darling, that happened years after my death.

THE MOTHER. That makes no difference. You drew him towards you into this room, you gained a hold upon him. It was here that Andrew always used to study. He did all his reading here. He would pace up and down here for hours at a time, smoking. And it was here that to my astonishment he said to me one day: *Mother, I'm going off on a trip to the tropics. I want to see something of the world.* He didn't say he was going there to combat yellow fever. You

THE MOTHER

always keep me in the dark about what you're really up to. You say to me, I'm only going off on a trip, Mother, and then you don't come back. Andrew left home like a thief in the night.

[*From a dark corner ANDREW, in a doctor's white overall, approaches them.*]

ANDREW. But, Mother, I explained things to you over and over again. I didn't want you to worry, and so I said nothing to you. That's all.

THE MOTHER. Is that what you call explaining things? I know you took that into account. But what you didn't take into account was that you might catch an infection there. But I wouldn't have forgotten that, Andrew. And that is the real point.

ANDREW. Well, and what use would it have been to you, Mother? I should have gone just the same?

THE MOTHER. You know, Andrew, you were such a steady, sensible boy. If it hadn't been for you, I should often have been at my wit's end. You were a second father to the other children, and you had such a sense of responsibility too. And suddenly, off you went to the tropics and died there of yellow fever. You needn't have done that, you can't tell me!

THE FATHER. You know, darling, a doctor has his duties to perform, too. That's all part of his profession, isn't it, Andrew?

THE MOTHER. Why did you take up with yellow fever, of all things? You might have stayed at home and cured people here, or brought children into the world.

ANDREW. You see, Mother, hundreds of thousands of people die of yellow fever every year. It'd be simply shameful if no remedy for it could be discovered. That's just a matter of duty, isn't it?

THE MOTHER. *Your* duty?

ANDREW. The duty of science. You know, Mother, it was a regular scourge. And if you'd seen the people dying of it

THE MOTHER

out there, you'd have been the first to say: Andrew, you can't leave them in that state. It's a difficult problem, Mother. Somebody had to go there.

THE MOTHER. But it didn't have to be you more than anybody else, Andrew. You'll never persuade me of that.

THE FATHER. Why not? I believe he had brains. It's always the best men, darling, who have to take up things of that sort.

THE MOTHER. And do the best men have to die of it?

THE FATHER. Why, yes. There's nothing else for it, darling. The best men always have to be in the forefront, you see. Don't worry your head about it, Andrew. You did the right thing.

THE MOTHER. Of course, you men always take each other's part against me. It's all very well for you to say that he did the right thing, but if you know how I felt when I read that telegram. I was so dazed that I couldn't make out what it meant. ". . . your son died a hero in the cause of science."

THE FATHER. There you are, dear: a hero. It did say hero, didn't it?

ANDREW. Never mind about that, Dad. That didn't matter to me in the slightest. My only concern was to discover the cause of yellow fever. A scientist has to look for causes, you know. That's all he's really interested in. As for heroism, why that's all moonshine. But discovery, even in a small way, is worth while.

THE MOTHER. And did you discover anything?

ANDREW. I didn't, Mother, but the others did. A Swede and an American.

THE FATHER. I'm sorry to hear that. I don't care for Americans.

THE MOTHER. But, Andrew, wasn't it useless? Wasn't it unnecessary?

ANDREW. No, Mother. You don't understand.

THE MOTHER. No, I don't. I suppose I've never under-

THE MOTHER

stood you. I'm always hearing the same thing from George and the twins. You don't understand, Mum. I don't understand! I don't understand. Good heavens, soon I shan't be able to understand myself. Here you all are, my own children, flesh of my flesh, and you keep telling me I don't understand you. What can there be so different, so peculiar about you that prevents me from understanding you?

ANDREW. [*Going nearer to her*] Mother, you mustn't excite yourself. Your heart is weak and you may do yourself harm.

THE MOTHER. No, let me have my say. I understood you all right when you were little. Do you remember, Andrew, if one of you hurt himself when you were playing outside, I knew all about it, although I was in the house, and out I would rush. And when you were all sitting round the table, such a powerful bodily feeling used to come over me: these children are part of me, they *are* me. And now all I hear is: You don't understand, Mum. Richard, what is this strange thing that has entered into these children and turned them against me?

THE FATHER. Why, darling, they're grown up now and have interests of their own, haven't they?

THE MOTHER. But all the interests I ever had were theirs. You are all wrapped up in your own pursuits, your own concerns, your own lofty ideals which I'm not supposed even to understand. But I was wrapped up only in you. I had no other concern but you. I know it wasn't anything to boast of, just worrying about them and loving them. But when I used to serve up a meal to you five children, I felt as if I was taking part in a religious service. Andrew, Andrew, you've no idea how I miss you.

ANDREW. I'm sorry, Mother.

THE MOTHER. You're quite right, I expect I didn't understand. For instance, your Dad was killed because some savages had to be slaughtered. And you died because you wanted to save their lives. Yes, perhaps I'm too stupid to make any sense of that. Each one does the exact opposite

THE MOTHER

and then I'm told that they both had lofty aims that I can't understand. One of you will build something and the other will pull it down. And then you'll say: Yes, Mother, these are very important things that we've simply got to do, even if it cost us our lives. It's all very well for you to talk like that. Dying's easy enough, but losing a husband or a son—well, if that had ever happened to you, then you'd see the difference.

ANDREW. Perhaps you're right there, Mother.

THE MOTHER. What do I care whether I'm right or not if I can't have you back again. You shouldn't have died, Andrew. You were such a kind, thoughtful boy. And you were engaged. You should have got married. Perhaps that's a thing I do understand, Andrew.

ANDREW. Yes, Mother.

[*Tells her from the garden.*]

THE FATHER. [*Raises his head*] What's that?

THE MOTHER. Nothing. They're shooting at a target. It's Christopher and Peter.

THE FATHER. Excellent. Anyone who can't shoot is no use whatever.

THE MOTHER. Tony won't go in for shooting, Richard. He's not suited for it. Andrew wasn't fond of shooting, either. Were you, Andrew? You were always at your books, just like Tony.

ANDREW. Yes, but with Tony, it's like a drug, Mother. He loses all sense of reality. That's bad, you know.

THE MOTHER. Oh, but he's still quite a child.

ANDREW. You'll always talk like that about him.

THE MOTHER. That's because he's delicate.

THE FATHER. You ought to persuade him to take up something worth while.

THE MOTHER. I won't. I won't have Tony at his age getting ideas into his head. I won't let him come into this room any more.

THE FATHER. Why not?

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Because you'd want to get him into your power. You'd start whispering to him: Be a man, Tony, be a man! Do something worth while! Lay down your life for fame, for honour, in the cause of truth—— No, I won't have it, do you hear? Leave Tony alone.

THE FATHER. But, darling, surely you don't want Tony to become a molly-coddle.

THE MOTHER. I want to have him for myself. You have no rights over him. Tony was born after your death. Tony is mine and nobody else's. From now he must stop coming into this room.

ANDREW. Looks as though Mother thinks we're bad company.

THE MOTHER. Yes, you are. Because you're dead.

[*Shots in the garden.*]

ANDREW. Mother, are you afraid of us?

THE MOTHER. What should I be afraid of you, my dear boy? I'm not. Andrew, let me look at you. You've no idea how becoming that white overall is. I always thought that you would be with me one day, when—when my time came to say good-bye to the children.

ANDREW. Why, mother, don't talk like that. You'll be here for a long time yet. You'll be here always, you know.

THE FATHER. Mother is stronger than she herself realizes. [*Walks towards the table where the chess-board is*] Who's been playing here, darling?

THE MOTHER. The twins. One of your problems, they told me.

THE FATHER. Yes, I know the one. I remember beginning to work it out. A very nice problem.

THE MOTHER. The boys quarrelled over it. Christopher wanted Peter to move to D5.

THE FATHER. Quite right. Anyhow, that's the move that I'd make.

THE MOTHER. But Peter said that there's another solution. You know those two are always at loggerheads.

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. [*Absently*] Another solution? I'd like to know what it could be. Perhaps they play chess on different lines now. I wonder whether, by moving the pawn forward. . . . Interesting. I must look into this. There may be something in what Peter said.

[GEORGE in airman's kit enters very quietly through the door.]

GEORGE. Good evening, Mum. How are you, Dad? Hallo, Andrew.

THE FATHER. [*Turning round*] Why, bless my soul, it's George.

ANDREW. How do you do?

THE MOTHER. Why are you back so soon, George? Have you been flying to-day?

GEORGE. Yes, Mum. It was a splendid day for flying, I can tell you.

THE MOTHER. I'm glad you're home. I don't like that flying of yours at all. I'm so nervous about it. Anyway, it's a good thing you're back so soon.

GEORGE. Why, of course, Mum. I've come straight to you.

THE FATHER. You've done the right thing. I'm just admiring the way that flying kit suits you, my boy.

THE MOTHER. [*Standing up, aghast*] Stop, George. Can you see Dad and Andrew?

GEORGE. Of course I can, Mum.

THE MOTHER. But they're dead, George. How can you see them? How can you talk to them, George?

GEORGE. Why, you see, Mum . . . but you mustn't be angry with me. You see something went wrong with my plane, that's all.

THE MOTHER. You mean, you had an accident?

GEORGE. Really, Mum, it didn't hurt in the least. The wing of my plane snapped, you see, and . . .

THE MOTHER. George, you're keeping something back from me.

THE MOTHER

GEORGE. You mustn't be angry, Mum, but I got killed.

THE MOTHER. You—you——

GEORGE. Please, Mum, don't get upset!

THE MOTHER. So you're dead, George.

GEORGE. Yes, Mum. I am what they call dead.

THE MOTHER. [*Moaning*] Oh God, George, my darling little George.

ANDREW. Keep calm, Mother. You mustn't upset yourself.

THE MOTHER. George, you've gone and got killed, I've lost you.

THE FATHER. You must bear it bravely, darling. You have the satisfaction of knowing that he died like a hero. It was a splendid death.

THE MOTHER. [*As if turned to stone*] A splendid death. There you go, Richard, there you go!

GEORGE. Really, Mum, it wasn't anybody's fault. You see, I was trying a stunt at the time and the engine conked out. To tell the truth, I myself don't know how it happened.

THE MOTHER. My boy——

[*Sinks into the armchair and starts crying.*]

ANDREW. Let Mother be. She'll feel better afterwards.

[*Remains standing by her side.*]

THE FATHER. [*Taking GEORGE on one side*] What was this stunt you were trying, George?

GEORGE. The altitude record, Dad. With load. Fifteen hundred kilograms.

THE FATHER. And has a record of that sort got any particular value?

GEORGE. Why, of course, Dad. For example, in war it means you can fly as high as possible and carry the maximum weight of bombs.

THE FATHER. I see. There's something in that.

GEORGE. Or take transport by air. When you're as high up as that, you're out of the way of storm and clouds. That might be of enormous value.

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. And how high did you get?

GEORGE. A little more than sixty thousand feet, but then the engine began to fail——

THE FATHER. Is that a record?

GEORGE. Yes, Dad. For those particular conditions it's a world record.

THE FATHER. That's fine. I'm delighted, my boy.

GEORGE. The only thing is that when I fell, everything got dreadfully messed up, Dad. I'm afraid the altimeter got smashed. That's rather a pity.

THE FATHER. Why?

GEORGE. Now it won't show what altitude I reached.

THE FATHER. That doesn't matter, George. The point is that you did reach it.

GEORGE. But what use is that if nobody knows about it?

THE FATHER. But you did it, that's the main thing. Who'd have thought it of you? You were always such a one for toys. Well, my boy, I must congratulate you.

THE MOTHER. [*Moaning*] George, my darling little George.

ANDREW. Calm yourself, Mother.

THE FATHER. Don't cry, darling. It was worth while. So stop crying. And look here, now there'll be all the bother of the funeral.

GEORGE. You mustn't look at me when they bring me home. What they bring home won't be me. I'm here, just as I always was, and you'll never see me any different, will you?

THE MOTHER. Why didn't you tell me you were going to fly so high? I wouldn't have let you go.

GEORGE. That wouldn't have done, Mother. I just had to.

THE MOTHER. What an idea to get into your head! Why did you want to break that record?

GEORGE. When anyone's got such a fine machine, they have to use it like that, Mother. But you don't understand. You see, a fellow can help himself——

[*Someone knocks at the door.*]

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. [*Puts out the lamp beneath his picture, the dusk in the room deepens*] You mustn't fret, darling.

THE MOTHER. My George. Such a fine boy he was. Why—why——

[*The knocking at the door is repeated.*]

ANDREW. [*Whispering*] You must keep calm, Mother. You must be strong.

THE FATHER. [*Whispering*] Good-bye, darling.

[*More knocking.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Standing up*] Come in.

[*CHRISTOPHER stands in the doorway, which is in broad daylight.*]

CHRISTOPHER. I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't want to disturb you, but there's something I've got to tell you.

THE MOTHER. Yes, what is it?

CHRISTOPHER. We've just heard the news. George met with a flying accident. But you mustn't be frightened, Mother. It's not so bad as all that.

THE MOTHER. Well——

CHRISTOPHER. You see, George—— but, Mother, I believe you've already heard.

[CURTAIN]

ACT 2

[*The same room, with the addition of a wireless set.*]

TONY. [*Kneeling down by the wireless set and turning the knob. A military march is heard. TONY shows signs of disgust and goes on turning the knob. The voice of an announcer is heard.*]

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. I have an important announcement to make.

TONY. You've got the same kind of voice, Chris.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. All citizens are called upon to help in the maintenance of peace and order. They are solemnly warned that if they assemble in the streets, the police and military authorities will intervene with the utmost severity.

TONY. Bah!

[*Goes on turning the knob. Soft, distant music is heard.*

TONY *kneels down and listens, beating time with his hand.*]

[*Enter CHRISTOPHER in a semi-military uniform: riding-boots, breeches, and a coat with badges.*]

CHRISTOPHER. Stop that, Tony. You know Mother doesn't like anyone playing about with that. It reminds her of George.

TONY. I say, just listen, Chris. Isn't that fine?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, but this isn't the time for things of that sort. Switch it off. I can't stand the sound of it.

TONY. [*Switches off the wireless and remains kneeling*] Sorry. It was a foreign station. I don't know which one. Somewhere in Scandinavia, I should imagine. It sounded sort of snowy——

CHRISTOPHER. Oh, shut up, will you. You're always imagining something. [*Lights a cigarette and paces nervously up and down the room*] It's too bad that I've got to be cooped

THE MOTHER

up here. [*Looks at his wrist-watch*] The workmen will be knocking off at any moment now. There might be something doing. By Jove, I wish I could be in it.

[*Stands listening at the window.*]

TONY. I say, Chris.

CHRISTOPHER. What is it?

TONY. What's happened to Peter?

CHRISTOPHER. I don't know. He's been arrested. He shouldn't have interfered.

TONY. But you're interfering, Chris.

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, but on the other side. That makes all the difference.

TONY. How does it?

CHRISTOPHER. We're for law and order and the good of the country. You're too young to understand that, Tony. And you can think yourself damn lucky you are.

TONY. Peter was for the good of the country too. But they arrested him just the same.

CHRISTOPHER. Because his ideas about it were all wrong. He thought we could be ruled by a filthy mob. A pretty state of affairs. They've already shown us what they're capable of. All they can do is to help themselves to loot and pay off old scores. [*Crumples the cigarette*] The country would be ruined, if they had their way, Tony.

TONY. But Peter put his foot down and stopped the looting.

CHRISTOPHER. More fool him! He'd like to turn this gang of ruffians into a government. We can't allow that, whatever happens.

TONY. Who's we?

CHRISTOPHER. Our side. We, the nation. If that lot had to rule us with all those crackbrain ideas of theirs about pacifism and equality, it'd be all up, my boy. Bah! What those fellows are after is sheer treachery to the nation. They want to disband the army, take over the administration, expropriate the factories—nothing less. That'd be a fine

THE MOTHER

look out for everything we hold dear. No. Peter, my good fellow, we're not going to let our country be messed up like that. It's high time to let these tub-thumpers and scabs get it in the neck. But I mustn't go on preaching to you, Tony.

TONY. [*Standing up*] I say, Chris——

CHRISTOPHER. Yes?

TONY. What's going to happen to Peter?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Shrugs his shoulders*] There's nothing we can do about it. We can only wait. Our lot ran him in, and for the time being he's under lock and key.

TONY. As a criminal.

CHRISTOPHER. As a hostage. Don't worry, nothing'll happen to him there. But if the Reds started shooting in the streets again, I wouldn't answer for the consequences.

TONY. Would they shoot Peter then?

CHRISTOPHER. I wouldn't, Tony. But war is war, you know. Peter oughtn't to have got mixed up with that crowd. I don't need to tell you, I should be frightfully sorry if—if anything were to happen. But that doesn't depend on us. If those blackguards will lay down their arms, our chaps will let Peter go and the other hostages too. That's the way things are.

TONY. [*With startled eyes*] Just imagine, Chris, just imagine what Peter's feelings must be. How he keeps staring at the door and waiting for it to open. *You're coming with us. Where? Get going, you'll see.*

CHRISTOPHER. Wait a moment. [*Listens*] Not a sound. It's lucky there's no shooting. If a shot were fired somewhere, there'd be trouble, Tony. Our chaps would show no mercy. But it looks as if that riff-raff have taken themselves off by now. They're a cowardly crew. Anyway, it'll show Peter the kind of people he's let himself in with. Shove a machine-gun in front of them and they'll bolt like rabbits. Can you hear anything? There isn't a sound. I suppose that means they're coming to terms. Though I'm

THE MOTHER

hanged if I can understand how anyone can come to terms with thugs of that sort.

TONY. Chris, does a man have his hands tied together?

CHRISTOPHER. Who? When?

TONY. When they take him out to be executed.

CHRISTOPHER. Of course. It stands to reason he has to be properly pinioned. Why do you ask?

TONY. [*Holds his hands behind his back, as if they were tied together*] You know, I can just imagine what a man feels like when he faces a firing-squad. He tries to take a peep at them over their heads and then there's a sort of cold tingling wind blowing through his hair. Not yet—another moment—fire. My God!

CHRISTOPHER. Shut up.

TONY. [*Shouts*] You swine, you bloody swine!

[*Staggers and falls on his knees.*]

CHRISTOPHER. [*Clutches him by the shoulders and shakes him.*] Enough of that, Tony, you've got a diseased imagination.

TONY. [*Covers his eyes and stands up*] Chris, how can people hate each other so?

CHRISTOPHER. You're too young to understand that. You haven't learnt yet what it means to stick to a cause through thick and thin, to do things for its sake that you'd never do for your own sake. The trouble with you, Tony, is that you're too touchy. Mother's simply spoiling you.

TONY. How?

CHRISTOPHER. She's bringing you up all wrong. If she goes on like that, you'll never be the kind of man who's prepared to fight for something. Peace, the brotherhood of man, and so on; it's all very pretty, I know. But to-day there's no time for that sort of talk, Tony. We're up against bigger things than that now. We've got to be prepared for anything that comes our way. If anything happens to Peter, Mother mustn't know about it. We'll just tell her he's been arrested, see? It looks as though they really have beaten a retreat. Perhaps those blasted Reds have given in, and that's

THE MOTHER

why it's so confoundedly quiet out there. You've got to stay where you are, Tony.

TONY: And what about you?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Shrugging his shoulders*] I ought to be outside, with our chaps. I only hope to goodness I don't miss anything if a row does start. What a bore it is being cooped up at home like this. But there you are, if there was the least bit of trouble—Mother's got such a weak heart. And you never know what lengths that mob would go to if they once got out of hand. So somebody must keep an eye on you here. [*With his back to TONY, takes a revolver out of a drawer, loads it, and puts it back*] I know where I ought to be. But Mother mustn't know that things are quite so serious, Tony. So I'll stay here for her sake and yours too, if it comes to that.

[*Enter THE MOTHER.*]

THE MOTHER. Chris, where's Peter? Why isn't he back yet? This morning you said it was bound to be only a misunderstanding and that they'd let him go in the evening. Do you hear what I'm saying, Chris?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, Mother, but they can't do it as quickly as that. You see, they've probably arrested hundreds and hundreds of people, and before they can settle each separate case, it may take as much as a week.

THE MOTHER. A week? You don't mean to say they'd treat Peter like that? I won't let them. I'll go and give them a piece of my mind.

CHRISTOPHER. You can't do that, Mum. Why, they wouldn't even let you in.

THE MOTHER. Wouldn't let me in, indeed! I'm going to take Peter some clean linen and some food. Nobody can stop me from doing that. A mother's entitled to do so.

CHRISTOPHER. You'll have to wait a bit, Mum. You see, just at present the streets are closed by the troops. Nobody's allowed to go into the central districts.

THE MOTHER. But they'll let a mother through. I'll tell

THE MOTHER

them I'm taking something to my son. I must see Peter. I must know how he is. Peter's not a criminal, that they should keep him under arrest like that. But make no mistake, I'll give them a piece of my mind. I'll tell them they've got no right to imprison my son.

CHRISTOPHER. That's all very well, Mum, but they have got the right to do it.

THE MOTHER. What, is Peter a criminal? Has he done anyone any harm?

CHRISTOPHER. No, he's not a criminal, Mum. Nobody says he is.

THE MOTHER. Very well, then. Then they've got no right to arrest him for no reason whatever.

CHRISTOPHER. You know, Mum, I don't think you quite understand——

THE MOTHER. I know. Tony, please leave me alone with Chris. There's no need for you to hear how silly your mother is.

[TONY shuffles out reluctantly.]

THE MOTHER. I'm trying to understand everything, Chris. But I just can't. How can anyone arrest my son when he hasn't harmed a soul? That's what I'm hardly likely to understand.

CHRISTOPHER. I'm sorry, Mother. You still don't seem to realize that we're having a civil war.

THE MOTHER. Well, what of it? Are we bound to have it?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes. Because the country's divided into two parties and only one of them can govern, you see. And so we've got to settle by fighting who's going to govern here.

THE MOTHER. And that's what they're shooting for?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes. That's the only way.

THE MOTHER. Does it really matter so much to them whether they govern or not? Haven't they any families? It's their families they ought to be looking after.

CHRISTOPHER. Families aren't everything.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. My family is to me, Chris. And don't tell me that Peter wanted to govern anyone. I know him through and through. He wouldn't hurt a fly. You perhaps might, Chris, but not Peter. It isn't in his nature to order anyone about.

CHRISTOPHER. That makes no difference, Mother. His side wants to order everyone about and upset things generally, just as they think fit. That'd be a disaster for the whole country, you see. They're a gang of criminals and traitors, Mother. They'd like to turn the country upside down and help themselves to everything——

THE MOTHER. Oh no, Chris. Don't talk to me like that. I know Peter. He wouldn't have anything to do with people of that sort. You wouldn't have anything to do with criminals and traitors either, Chris.

CHRISTOPHER. The trouble is that Peter will trust people so blindly.

THE MOTHER. Why, of course, he's so young. You were never so young and sociable, Chris. You didn't make friends easily. You were always inclined to be rather off-hand with people. But Peter would never take up with anything that's bad.

CHRISTOPHER. Then that means that I would, Mother. Either he and his party are in the right, or we are. One of the two must be doing something hopelessly crooked.

THE MOTHER. I know you're not. There is something so fine and dignified about you. It simply isn't in you to do anything mean or dishonourable.

CHRISTOPHER. I'm glad you think that, Mother. Now let me assure you on my honour that Peter was on the wrong side, and that we simply must get rid of that gang in the interests of law and order.

THE MOTHER. Yes, my boy, but did they have to arrest Peter in the interests of law and order?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, Mother. Once he had got himself mixed up in this business.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Then it's a disgrace, Chris. They can't be in the right if they arrested Peter.

CHRISTOPHER. Mother, if there'd been any chance of it, Peter would have had me arrested.

THE MOTHER. Peter?

CHRISTOPHER. I mean his crowd would have.

THE MOTHER. Only if they were fools and scoundrels. You have no evil intentions, Chris. How could they arrest you, then? That would be just as great an injustice as arresting Peter. They are bad people, Chris. Bad, brutal, stupid people. Good heavens, how I should like to bang my fist into their faces. . . .

CHRISTOPHER. Really, Mother.

THE MOTHER. We can't leave him where he is, Chris. You'll have to help me, somehow or other. You say they may keep him there for several days more?

CHRISTOPHER. They may, Mother. But then they're bound to set him free. There isn't a sound outside now. You'll see, to-morrow the whole business will be over.

THE MOTHER. And then you'll come with me to fetch Peter?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, Mother.

THE MOTHER. And couldn't I take something to him to-day?

CHRIS. Not to-day, Mother.

[*A few shots in the distance. It gets darker.*]

THE MOTHER. What's that?

CHRISTOPHER. [*Uneasily*] Nothing. It's in some street, a long way off. I say, Mother, nobody must leave the house.

THE MOTHER. But Peter must be waiting—

CHRISTOPHER. You will keep harping on Peter. He's not the only one to be considered.

THE MOTHER. You mean that something might happen to Tony or to you?

CHRISTOPHER, I'm sorry you don't understand, Mother. I'm thinking of our country.

[*A few distant shots.*]

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. I only hope to goodness that nothing happens to Peter.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Listening at the window*] I only hope to goodness that nothing happens to our country, Mother. Somewhere outside there's a squad of our fellows standing by. You've no idea what splendid chaps they are. The pick of our troops. They're all crack shots and they'll be the first to get going when the time comes. And then they'll look at each other and say: Where's Chris? I'm here. I can't join you. I've got to stay at home. Somebody has to be there in case anything happens. Good luck, boys, but you'll have to count me out.

THE MOTHER. Chris, what's the matter with you?

CHRISTOPHER. Nothing, Mother. Don't be afraid. I'll stay here with you and Tony. If there's any trouble in the streets, all sorts of riff-raff may be on the prowl. You needn't be afraid, Mother. I shall be at home.

[*Walks towards the rack containing the rifles.*]

THE MOTHER. What are you looking for?

CHRISTOPHER. Father's rifle, the one he had in Africa. It's about time to give it a thorough cleaning again.

[*Takes the rifle from the rack.*]

THE MOTHER. But I dust it every day.

CHRISTOPHER. You don't understand, mother. A rifle needs more than that. It needs a little shooting now and then, you see. [*Lays his arm on his mother's shoulder*] Don't worry, Mother. Everything will be all right.

THE MOTHER. And Peter will come back?

CHRISTOPHER. Yes, Mother, yes.

[*Exit.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Gazing after him*] I know you're not telling me the truth, Chris.

[*Walks across the room, putting various objects straight.*

Several shots in the distance.]

THE MOTHER. Heavens, if only I knew what is happening to Peter. [*Sinks into an armchair and clasps her hands*] O Lord

THE MOTHER

God, watch over my son Peter. Mary, mother of mercy, have compassion upon me and protect my child. Christ Jesus, restore my son Peter to me. Mary, Mother of God, plead for my child. Christ, who perished on the cross, have mercy upon my children.

[PETER *silently appears in the doorway. He is wearing only trousers and a shirt which is open in front. It is now almost quite dark.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Jumping up*] Peter! Have they let you go already?

PETER. Not they. But I've finished with them, Mother.

THE MOTHER. [*Going towards him*] I was so scared about you. Come up close to me, Peter darling.

PETER. [*Moving away*] No, Mother. Please stay where you are.

THE MOTHER. [*Holding out her hand towards him*] What's the matter with you, my dear boy? What have you done with your coat?

PETER. [*Moving away from her*] It's there, it's there. They'll send it on to you. The coat and all the other things. They're shocking sticklers for order.

THE MOTHER. Who?

PETER. They are, the Whites, you know. Don't light up yet, Mum. I'm terribly sorry, but there's something I ought to tell you. That's why I came straight here to you. Perhaps it'll be best if I tell you myself.

THE MOTHER. Peter, what has happened? [*Moving her hands towards him*] Come closer to me.

PETER. [*Moves away*] You mustn't be angry with me, but I really couldn't help it, Mother. Chris couldn't help it either.

THE MOTHER. Couldn't help what?

PETER. Good heavens, Mother, what a long time it's taking you to understand. Well, it was only to be expected. Chris knew beforehand that it would happen. Anyhow, it's over and done with now.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. [*With increasing alarm*] What's over and done with, Peter, darling?

PETER. Oh, it's all so terribly stale now, Mother. It happened quite half an hour ago.

THE MOTHER. What did?

PETER. Why, they shot me, Mother.

THE MOTHER. Peter!

[*Staggers and sinks to the floor.*]

PETER. But, Mother! Good heavens, what have I——? Come and help me, somebody. Andrew!

[*ANDREW runs in from the darkness. He is wearing a white overall.*]

ANDREW. What's the matter?

PETER. Just look, Mother has——

ANDREW. [*Kneels down beside her and feels her pulse*] Let's see what's wrong, Mother.

[*THE FATHER, in uniform, enters from the darkness.*]

THE FATHER. Is anything the matter with her?

PETER. I don't know. She suddenly stumbled on to the floor.

THE FATHER. Why aren't you more careful? [*Kneels down beside THE MOTHER*] Darling, what's the matter with you?

[*GEORGE, in airman's kit, appears out of the darkness.*]

GEORGE. Hallo, father. Isn't Mother well?

[*Lights the lamp on the writing-table.*]

ANDREW. [*Kneeling down beside her*] It's her heart. The beat's very irregular. Poor mother!

THE FATHER. If only we could send for someone.

ANDREW. What for? We're here, aren't we? She won't regain consciousness for a while yet. A nervous shock, you know. The best thing is to let her rest. Bring some pillows here.

PETER. [*Fetching pillows*] Here you are.

ANDREW. Lift up her head, Dad. [*Lays the pillows underneath*] Now lie quite still, Mother. [*Stands up*] Keep away from her. She needs quiet.

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. [*Standing up*] What made you scare her like that, Peter? And what are you doing here, anyway?

ANDREW. Just a moment, Dad. [*Turns PETER to the light and examines his forehead*] Dear me! The first and second got him there. [*Undoes his shirt and taps his chest*] One, two, three. Man alive, that one went right through your heart.

THE FATHER. Let's see. A regular bull's-eye. Strange, it looks almost like—— I remember we once put an Arab in front of a firing-squad. My goodness me, where on earth did you get that from?

PETER. A firing-squad, Dad.

THE FATHER. You don't mean to say that the troops executed you, my boy?

PETER. Yes, Dad.

THE FATHER. Surely you weren't guilty of treachery, Peter?

PETER. No, Dad. I joined a great and honourable cause.

THE FATHER. Against the troops? It doesn't seem quite right to me, my boy.

PETER. There are troops on our side, too, Dad.

THE FATHER. Troops on both sides?

PETER. Yes.

THE FATHER. Our troops divided against themselves?

PETER. Yes, Dad.

THE FATHER. That sounds bad to me, Peter. Our troops divided against themselves. Surely you've got things mixed up a bit, my boy. Then you must have acted as a spy, Peter.

PETER. No, Dad. I only wrote newspaper articles.

THE FATHER. Don't talk nonsense, Peter. They wouldn't shoot you for that. We only used to execute spies or traitors.

GEORGE. The times have changed, Dad.

THE FATHER. It certainly looks like it. I suppose the game, as you play it, has some new rules. [*Turning to THE MOTHER*] Well, how is she?

THE MOTHER

ANDREW. [*Seated, bending over her*] She's unconscious. She looks as if she were asleep.

THE FATHER. That's all right then. She's the only one who can hear what we say——

ANDREW. ——and who can talk to us. She's the only one who hasn't lost touch with us.

PETER. [*Aimlessly twirling the globe on the writing-table*] What an awful business it was, having to tell her that.

GEORGE. I know, my dear fellow. It makes you feel as if you were confessing to having behaved like a cad. [*He opens a drawer in the writing-table and rummages about in it*] I say, you fellows, did you know that Mother has actually kept the pipes we used to smoke? She's a good sort, is Mother. When we were alive she wouldn't let us smoke in here. [*Puts an empty pipe in his mouth and acts as if he were smoking it*] Mm. Mm. After all, you can't help feeling at home here.

[*Shots outside.*]

THE FATHER. [*Goes to the window*] Seems to be some shooting going on round here.

[*Listens.*]

PETER. [*Aimlessly moving ash-trays and paper-weights to and fro*] That's our men. They're firing at our men.

GEORGE. And my notebooks are here too. Just fancy Mother keeping them. [*Turns over the pages of a notebook*] Here's one of my drawings. I say, that's awfully funny. And this is where I tried to sketch a diagram of a new sort of wing.

PETER. [*Placing on the writing-table a negro statuette which was on top of the cabinet*] Let's see.

GEORGE. What are you bringing that here for?

PETER. For no particular reason. Just for the sake of doing something, I suppose.

THE FATHER. [*Turning away from the window*] Leave him alone, George. People who've just died are always a bit restless. They want to remind someone that they've been

THE MOTHER

here. He'll get over that. I say, Peter, I hope you at least behaved like a man.

PETER. [*Putting a tobacco-jar elsewhere*] Yes, Dad. I didn't move an eyelid.

THE FATHER. That's good. You mustn't disgrace us, you know.

ANDREW. [*Sitting beside THE MOTHER*] It must be damned unpleasant to be executed like that.

PETER. You're right. When I stood there with my hands tied and saw those six raw recruits facing me—country lads most likely—I felt sorry for them, I can tell you. I couldn't stand being one of a firing-squad.

THE FATHER. Weren't you blind-folded?

PETER. No, Dad. They wanted to blind-fold me, but I refused.

THE FATHER. That's the spirit. Who was in command?

PETER. Oh, some lieutenant or other, a little shrimp of a fellow, with a squeaky voice. He did his best to put the fear of God into everyone, so that they shouldn't see how sick he felt. He actually loaded the revolver under my very nose, as if he was going to finish me off if the soldiers didn't do the job properly.

ANDREW. Good heavens!

THE FATHER. It has to be done, Andrew. That's the only way.

PETER. Good Lord, how that jackass got on my nerves! In the end I said to him: Get out of it, you silly duffer, and let me take charge.

THE FATHER. You shouldn't have done that, Peter. An execution is a serious matter. I was once present on just such an occasion, and—well, that's no time for talking.

PETER. Well, Dad, when you're in a rotten mess like that, you've got to do something to keep your spirits up. The soldiers started laughing and so did I. That sort of relieved our feelings, you see. So then he went all red,

THE MOTHER

whisked out his sword and squeaked : *Attention, shoulder arms!*
I can tell you, it——

GEORGE. What?

PETER. It was all I could do not to give way at the knees, or something of that sort. Suddenly I had a ghastly feeling of weakness in my legs and stomach. Brr ! I felt like a piece of limp rag. It's funny, you know, but I can't remember that little runt giving the order to fire. I only felt a cold wind blowing through my hair.

ANDREW. That was funk.

PETER. I suppose it was. [*Again restlessly moving things about*] But I can tell you, it was a ghastly feeling. Ghastly !

GEORGE. [*Looking up from his notebook*] You don't need to tell me.

PETER. You can't imagine what it's like, George. Nobody can.

GEORGE. I can, don't worry. When I was falling from my plane it wasn't much different.

PETER. Yes, that was all over in a moment.

GEORGE. Not a bit of it. When you fall from a height of sixty thousand feet, it takes you quite a long time to reach the ground. In fact, you can't tell how long. It seems as if it's going to last for ever. And all the time you've got a feeling as if the whole blessed earth was rushing towards you.

ANDREW. What passed through your mind while that was happening?

GEORGE. Nothing particular. There was only a sort of dreadful calm. So this is the end, or words to that effect. There I was, calmly, clearly, and helplessly thinking things over like that, and at the same time looking to see where I was likely to get smashed up. Not there, I don't like the look of those trees. This field would perhaps be a nicer spot to fall into.

PETER. So you didn't do so badly, after all.

GEORGE. That's all you know ! I tell you, that helpless

THE MOTHER

feeling was worse than any pain I can think of. It was just as if everything had gone numb inside me, so that I couldn't move a limb. Brr !

ANDREW. Sounds more like funk to me, George.

GEORGE. That's not for me to say. But another time I'd rather not—Brr ! A ghastly feeling.

[*A brief silence.*]

PETER. And what about you, Andrew?

ANDREW. Well, I had plenty of time. In my case it took several days and nights before I——

PETER. ——before you died?

ANDREW. Yes. I knew three days beforehand that my time was up. When you realize that, your mind starts working and you begin to remember things. I can't say I liked it much. And to make matters worse, I couldn't help watching myself get worse and worse, symptom by symptom. Every item tallied, just as the textbooks tell you : Now your liver's done for, now your——

THE FATHER. But tell me, Andrew, how on earth did you manage to catch yellow fever?

ANDREW. It was an experiment, Dad. We wanted to find out whether that wretched mosquito, the stegomia, would convey the disease also from patients who had passed through the first stage of infection. You see, they weren't quite sure about it. So I let myself be bitten by the test mosquitoes——

THE FATHER. And you caught it.

ANDREW. Yes, I caught it properly. As a matter of fact, it was contrary to what had been expected.

THE FATHER. And has an experiment of that kind any value?

ANDREW. [*Shrugs his shoulders*] Why yes, at any rate, it has scientific value. We wanted to find out how the bacillus develops in the mosquitoes. That's pretty important, Dad.

GEORGE. And is it a troublesome business to die of that fever?

THE MOTHER

ANDREW. I should say so. There you lie, as weak as a rat, and first the fever has a go at you, and then there's jaundice and God knows what else. It's a beastly disease, I can tell you. Brr! I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to catch it.

PETER. Well, it rather looks as if Dad was the only one of us who died a glorious death.

THE FATHER. Me? What makes you think that?

PETER. Why, to get killed in battle, that's a——

THE FATHER. But I didn't get killed that way, my boy.

PETER. You didn't get killed that way? But we always thought——

THE FATHER. ——that I got killed during the last attack, I know. That was for Mother's sake. You see, they couldn't tell her what really happened.

GEORGE. Then how did you . . . ?

THE FATHER. I didn't get killed, far from it. But I was left lying there.

ANDREW. Wounded?

THE FATHER. Yes, And that's where the natives found me.

PETER. And then?

THE FATHER. Well, then they tortured me. [*With a movement of the hand*] We needn't go into that, I think. Andrew, how is Mother?

ANDREW. Her pulse is better.

THE FATHER. Boys, Mother must never know about this, of course.

[*A brief silence.*]

GEORGE. [*Still with his notebook*] You know, we were always told how fine it is to die on behalf of something or other: science or country or faith or the salvation of mankind or whatever it might be. But when you've done it——

ANDREW. —— you find that it's different from what you were led to expect. I know. If people could only realize what it makes a man feel like, then perhaps they wouldn't

THE MOTHER

harp so much on how fine it is to die for a cause. Fine! There's nothing particularly fine about my death, as far as I can see.

[*A few distant shots outside.*]

THE FATHER. Well, men have always died for something or other which is now quite forgotten. I suppose it had to be. But sometimes I think that if to-day I was a retired colonel or general living here with you and Mother, I'd write my memoirs and do a bit of digging in the garden. It wouldn't be at all bad, you know. After all, life has got its good points. It gives you a chance of doing something. I know that you all laid down your lives for something big. Andrew here for science, and George for the improvement of aircraft, and Peter—what exactly did you die for, Peter, my boy?

PETER. [*Arranging chess-men on the board*] For equality and freedom, Dad.

THE FATHER. Ah, and I died for my king, my country, and the honour of the regiment. Or because a colonel gave a damned silly order, but never mind. They're all tremendous things to die for, but, you know, I've been dead longer than any of you, and you can take my word for it that I wouldn't refuse the chance of living a bit longer. I enjoyed being alive. Thoroughly enjoyed it. And when I look at you, I can't help thinking that one of these boys of mine might achieve something worth while or even something really great. And now here we are, all heroes. It's confoundedly unfair. We might have been still alive.

ANDREW. [*Stands up and stretches himself*] It's a bore, that's what it is. There's nothing left for us but to look on while others do things. Now that we're dead we can only follow the line of least resistance. [*Walks over to the bookcase*] By Jove, if I were still alive, I'd work like fury. Sleeping sickness, that'd be my line.

GEORGE. [*Still with his notebook*] Well, I'll be——

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. What is it?

GEORGE. Why, I've just had a brain-wave. It's quite workable, too. Damn, I wish to goodness I'd thought of it before. Wait a bit, let's get a rough idea of what it ought to look like. [*Sits down at the writing-table and starts making a sketch*] Yes, that's about right.

ANDREW. [*Opening the bookcase*] I say, Mother really is wonderful.

PETER. [*At the chess-board*] In what way?

ANDREW. She still takes in my medical papers. Here's the latest number of the *Bulletin for Tropical Diseases*. I used to contribute to that.

PETER. Yes, and there was a first-rate obituary notice of you in it, too.

ANDREW. [*Taking out one of the papers*] I suppose I really ought to have a look at this, just to keep in touch with things a bit.

[*Makes himself comfortable on the sofa and starts looking through the paper, which is still uncut.*]

THE FATHER. [*Standing beside THE MOTHER*] You see, darling, you've got them here with you again. They feel quite at home. You see, my dear, we're still alive as far as you're concerned.

PETER. [*At the chess-board*] No, that's no good. My word, what a tough problem!

GEORGE. [*Busy with his sketch*] Yes, that's about right, but the centre of gravity would have to be shifted a bit lower down.

THE FATHER. [*Opening a portable gramophone*] I used to take this gramophone about with me. I even took it to the front. [*Winding it up as if by habit*] This was my favourite record. Poor Mother left it there as a keepsake.

[*Starts the gramophone.*]

[*The gramophone plays softly. THE FATHER listens. The others are engrossed in their own interests.*]

ANDREW. [*Reading his medical periodical*] Just fancy, at last

they've found a cure for leprosy. I must say I'm pleased to hear that.

[*Shooting outside.*]

GEORGE. [*Busy with his sketch*] They haven't stopped shooting yet.

PETER. [*With the chess-board*] They're only just starting. I say, Dad, it looks to me as if this problem of yours will end in stalemate. There's no way for red or black to win.

[*The shooting becomes louder. The gramophone stops playing.*]

THE FATHER. That was my favourite— [*Turns away and listens*] Do you hear that? Ratatata. Machine-guns, Peter.

PETER. Then that means they're only just starting. I thought so. [*Jumps up*] What a shame! I only wish I could be in it. Now then, boys, show 'em what you're made of!

ANDREW. [*Stands up and throws his paper aside*] There'll be some more heroes, eh? I don't like the sound of that.

PETER. Man alive, why, it's a joy to listen to it. Sheer music! That's our fellows getting busy. Now's the time. They've started an attack at terrific speed. Now they're raking the streets with machine-guns and dashing forward in grand style. Fine work, boys. I didn't die for nothing, after all.

THE FATHER. That's a quick-firing gun. Pom-pom-pom-pom. Two miles distance, adjust sights.

GEORGE. [*Standing up*] On centre of town, Dad.

PETER. [*Excitedly*] Those are our guns. That means we've won.

THE FATHER. I only hope Mother won't be scared.

ANDREW. She knows nothing about it. [*Aimlessly winds and unwinds a strip of bandage which he has found in his pocket*] What damned fools they are to shoot in the streets. There'll be wholesale slaughter.

PETER. Never mind that! They've got to make room for the newcomers. And that'd be worth while even if it

THE MOTHER

cost thousands and thousands of lives. Do you hear that shooting? My word, that's grand. I only wish I could be there.

THE FATHER. Now they're shooting all over the place. It seems pretty bad to me. More like murder than anything else.

PETER. Well, what if it is? There's nothing else for it. The time was bound to come when the traitors would have to get their deserts. Shooting's the only thing for those brutal Whites. Do you hear it spreading? Our fellows will fight to the last. We've got the infantry on our side. And the sailors as well. And the people. All they've got are the officers. They've got airmen and guns, but they can't shoot from them inside a city. They'd destroy it if they tried to do that, wouldn't they, Dad?

THE FATHER. I don't know, Peter. You seem to have different rules nowadays.

GEORGE. [*By the wireless set*] And who's in control of the broadcasting station?

PETER. Our fellows, of course. Turn it on, George, let's hear what they've got to say.

GEORGE. Right you are. [*Turns the knob*] Now listen.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. [*Similar to CHRISTOPHER's Voice*] This the headquarters of the Whites speaking.

PETER. [*Aghast*] There must be some mistake.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The commander of the army of the Whites calls for the last time upon the Reds to stop their butchery in the streets. Lay down your arms. If this is not done within five minutes, the commander will give orders for the artillery to bombard the city.

PETER. [*Shouting*] I say, they can't do that. Dad, they can't do that, can they? Those scoundrels have gone mad.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The commander of the army of the Whites orders all citizens to take shelter in their cellars. If the Reds do not surrender within four minutes, the guns will be trained on the centre of the city and the

THE MOTHER

bombardment will start. If necessary, aircraft will be brought in to strengthen our efforts.

PETER. You bloody ruffians! You won't do it. You're only trying to scare us, you murderous gang of Whites.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The responsibility for the destruction of the city and the loss of human lives lies with the leaders of the Reds. We have issued our warning in good time. We went on negotiating until the last moment, while the Reds had treacherously started to murder our hostages, our officers, and citizens——

PETER. That's a lie! It was you who started it, you rats, you bloody rats! [*Showing his bare chest*] What about this?

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. We refuse further negotiations. Anyone caught in possession of firearms will be instantly shot. All who sided with the Reds will be tried by court martial. Within two minutes the bombardment of the city will begin. For the last time we call upon the Reds to surrender. Only by complying with this request will you save our city from a disaster the extent of which cannot be foreseen.

PETER. Take no notice, take no notice. Don't surrender, boys. Let him destroy the city if he wants to. Let him do his damndest.

ANDREW. Then there'll be something worth dying for, won't there? Switch it off, George.

[*GEORGE switches the wireless off.*]

PETER. Yes, then there'll be something worth dying for. Up, the Reds. For freedom, for victory, for a better world. Don't give in, boys. Never mind if the whole city is blown to pieces, never mind if the whole nation is butchered, never mind if the whole world goes phut, as long as our cause wins! Better for everyone to be wiped out, than for those filthy Whites to get the upper hand.

[*A volley in the distance.*]

THE FATHER. Those are the guns. Heavy stuff, too, by the sound of it. Well, they've kept their word.

THE MOTHER

GEORGE. You know, I'm almost glad now that I'm . . .

THE FATHER. . . . that you're dead? I should say so! Bang! That was a heavier one than the others.

PETER. Murderers! Bloody murderers!

ANDREW. Not so much noise. Mother's beginning to come round.

GEORGE. Poor Mother, she's chosen the worst possible moment.

THE FATHER. Put out the lights.

[*Darkness. Booming of guns and crackle of rifle fire.*]

ANDREW'S VOICE. Good-bye, Mother.

THE FATHER'S VOICE. Don't be afraid, darling, we are always with you.

GEORGE'S VOICE. That's only a storm, Mother. It'll soon be over.

PETER'S VOICE. Murderers! Murderers!

[*Rumble of guns and shooting. In the window the red glow of the distant fire becomes larger and larger.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Raising her head*] Peter. Chris. Tony. Chris, what's all that noise? Where's Peter? Tony, where's Chris? Chris, do you hear me?

[*TONY in the doorway.*]

TONY. Are you here, Mother? [*Switches on the light*] I've been looking for you.

THE MOTHER. [*Covering her eyes*] Tony, where's Peter? Hasn't he come back yet?

TONY. No, not yet. Mother . . .

THE MOTHER. What's all that noise, Tony?

TONY. They're shooting, Mother, but it's a long way off, you know. You needn't be afraid. I'll be here with you. [*Opens the table drawer to take out the revolver which CHRISTOPHER has loaded*] Don't be afraid.

THE MOTHER. What are you doing, Tony? Leave that revolver alone. Don't pick it up. You mustn't meddle with it.

TONY. You see, Mother, I only thought that if anything—Chris said that . . .

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Where is Chris? Call Chris.

TONY. You mustn't be angry, Mother, but——

THE MOTHER. Tony, where is Chris?

TONY. He went out, Mother. He took his rifle and said that you weren't to be angry with him for leaving you here, but that he simply had to go.

[The curtain falls while the guns boom.]

ACT 3

[The same room, but all the weapons and rifles have been removed from the walls and racks.]

THE MOTHER. *[Takes the last brace of pistols from the wall, locks them away in a drawer and keeps the key]* So much for that. I don't want Tony to have all these firearms under his nose the whole time. *[Looks round]* I won't have it. *[Goes to the window and closes the shutters]* And I'm not going to let him look out of the window, either. *[Switches on the light from the doorway]* Is there anything left here? *[Goes to the wireless set]* And I suppose you're still busy talking. Tony needn't know what's going on outside. *[Hesitates by the wireless set]* And I—I don't want to know. I don't want to hear another syllable. I just don't care what happens. *[Hesitates]* You see, you've got to keep quiet. And you'd like to talk, wouldn't you? You'd like to put all sorts of silly ideas into Tony's head again, wouldn't you? No, you're not going to shout at us any more. You can do all the broadcasting you like, but not here. No, I'm in charge here. You're not going to talk any more nonsense to Tony. What do you think of that? *[Switches on the wireless]* Well, come along, let's hear what you've got to say.

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. *[A woman's voice, tense and insistent]* . . . it is a crime which has been committed against all justice; every agreement has been trodden underfoot; the most appalling acts of violence have been perpetrated. Without any declaration of war, without the least justification, without the slightest attempt at negotiation, a foreign army has crossed the frontiers of our country. Without a single word of warning, for no reason whatever, without any declaration of war, foreign guns and aeroplanes

THE MOTHER

began to bombard our cities and towns. The enemy took advantage of a critical juncture when our nation was seriously weakened as the result of an unfortunate civil war, and encroached upon our territory under the pretext of restoring order there. Who gave him the right to do this? What grounds has he for intervention? There is no such right, there are no such grounds. We are broadcasting this appeal to the whole world: a crime, an unspeakable crime, has been committed. Nous appelons toute l'humanité; voyez quel crime. Wir rufen die ganze Welt an: es wird eine schreckliche Untat begangen. Our nation, our unhappy and exhausted nation, is brought to the last gasp.

THE MOTHER. [*Switching off the wireless*] What's the use of shouting at me? I don't want to listen to you. A crime! A crime! And wasn't it a crime when they shot Peter? And wasn't it a crime when my son Christopher got killed? What's the use of talking to me about crimes? I know all about them. I am a mother. More crimes were committed against me than against anyone else. Of course, you didn't know my boys. I only wish you could have seen them when they used to be the life and soul of this house. Go on shouting to the world. I did the same once, and do you think I got any answer?

[*Switches on the wireless.*]

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. . . . so we must do the best we can without any outside help. We shall defend ourselves to the last breath. We shall throw up a barricade of corpses. Our troops are fighting against the enemy with courage born of desperation, but they cannot hold out unless they receive reinforcements. We call upon every man in this country. You must come forward to fill the gaps in their ranks. We call upon every man to come and take up arms against the enemies of his country. We call upon the women of this country to carry on with the work of the husbands and sons whom they are sending to the colours.

THE MOTHER. [*Switches off the wireless*] No, it's not the

THE MOTHER

slightest use talking to me like that. I won't send anyone to you. I haven't anyone left. Tony can't go, he's still a child. They haven't ordered children into the army yet. And what business is it of yours to send anyone's husbands and sons to the colours? They aren't yours, so hold your tongue. Have you any sons? Don't tell me you have.

[*Switches on the wireless.*]

VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. . . . and it is no human voice, but your country itself which calls you. I, your mother-country, appeal to all my sons; defend me, defend my children.

THE MOTHER. [*Switches off the wireless*] No, you're not a mother. But I am, I'm a mother, do you hear? What right have you got to my children? If you were a mother, you wouldn't send them to war. You'd hide them, as I do; you'd lock them away, as I do, and you'd shout: I won't give them up. To tell the truth, I haven't anyone left to give up. There's nobody left here. I'm the only one left, a crazy old woman. I've nobody left, nobody . . .

[*TONY stands in the doorway.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Turning round*] What do you want here? [*With a horrified shriek*] Tony, you too . . . ? [*Throws herself upon him and passes her hands over his body*] No, thank God, it's you, it's you. You're alive, aren't you? How you frightened me. What are you looking for, Tony? You know I don't want you to listen here . . . to that woman. I won't have it, Tony.

TONY. But, Mother, her voice is so wonderful. It fills me with awe. You know, I can just imagine what she looks like. She's tall and pale, with very big eyes . . .

THE MOTHER. Never mind about her.

TONY. But she calls me.

THE MOTHER. That's no concern of yours, Tony. Let her say what she likes. And don't come in here any more, Tony. I'm going to lock the door of this room.

TONY. What for?

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. [*Sitting down*] Oh, I'm just going to lock it, that's all. I'm going to store food here for us. If there's going to be a war, I must be able to feed you, my darling boy. It isn't as if this room was of any real use. Thank goodness I thought of laying in a store of food. The two of us are going to live down below, in the cellar. Nobody will be able to see us there. And the house will look quite empty.

• TONY. But, Mother . . .

THE MOTHER. Wait a moment, Tony. Don't be afraid, I'll hide you away so well that nobody will guess you're at home. You must never venture out, but you'll put up with that, we'll put up with everything, until the trouble outside is all over. You won't even know there's a war. You're not fit for that sort of thing, you're too young. We'll slip into the cellar like a couple of mice, and you'll read books there and remember that the sun's shining outside. We'll be quite cosy there, shan't we?

TONY. Mother, please let me go, please, Mother.

THE MOTHER. But, Tony, what can you be thinking of? You mustn't talk like that, my dear boy.

TONY. Mother, please let me go, please do, and then I can volunteer for service. Mother, I can't stay here.

THE MOTHER. Don't be foolish, Tony. You can't go. Why, you're not eighteen yet.

TONY. That doesn't make any difference, Mother. All the boys in our class are going to volunteer. Please, Mother, you must let me go.

THE MOTHER. That's nonsense, my child. What use would you be to them?

TONY. You're wrong there, Mother. I'd make just as good a soldier as anyone else in our class. Besides, I've given my word.

THE MOTHER. To whom?

TONY. To my schoolfellows, Mother.

THE MOTHER. I think that concerns your mother more than your schoolfellows, Tony.

THE MOTHER

TONY. I'm sorry, Mother, but if all of them are going . . .

THE MOTHER. . . . then you needn't go, my dear boy. You'll stay at home.

TONY. Why has it got to be me more than anybody else?

THE MOTHER. Because you're not fit for that kind of thing, Tony. You're too delicate. And besides, my dear boy, I won't have it. Isn't that enough?

TONY. Mother, please don't be angry, but, you see, ~~this~~ is the last chance of saving everything—of saving our country——

THE MOTHER. And I suppose you're going to save the country, eh? Without you all will be lost, is that it? I don't think that you're likely to turn the scale.

TONY. If every mother talked like that——

THE MOTHER. It wouldn't surprise me in the least. Do you think she can ever calmly face the idea of having her children taken away from her, one after another? Why, she wouldn't deserve the name of mother, if she willingly put up with that.

TONY. But with such a terrible war on, Mother——

THE MOTHER. I didn't start it, Tony. No mother started it. We mothers, my dear boy, never waged any war. All we did was to help to pay for them with our children. But I'm not going to be so silly now as to give up the last one I have. They'll have to fight this war without my help. I won't give them anything else. And I won't let them have you, Tony.

TONY. You mustn't be angry, Mother, but I've got to go. You see, it's an order. We've all got to volunteer.

THE MOTHER. You're not grown up, Tony. You're still a child. I only have to close my eyes and what do you think I can see? A teeny, weeny, prattling kiddy, sitting on the floor and trying to push a toy into his ickle moufie. Naughty Tony. Tony mustn't do that! Tony, take the toy out of his ickle moufie and give it to mama!

TONY. I'm not a child now, Mother.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Aren't you? Come over here and let me have a look at you. So you'd like to be a soldier, eh? Just fancy that, now! Tony, do you remember that I once had a son, a big boy he was, and he promised me something altogether different? I taught him to hate war, didn't I? And he said: Mum, when we're big boys, there won't be any more war. We won't have it. We won't kill each other. We won't let ourselves be slaughtered like cattle. Mum, how can a man want to fight against other men? Isn't that what you said, Tony?

TONY. Yes, but this is something quite different. You see, this is only self-defence.

THE MOTHER. Then you could go and kill somebody?

TONY. Yes, Mother. That is, I think that if it has to be done——

THE MOTHER. And you'd like to go?

TONY. Yes, I'd love to.

THE MOTHER. So there you are, Tony. You see how it is. Now even you have forsaken me. I shan't be able to understand even you now. How you have changed, my dear boy.

TONY. Mother, you're crying. Then you'll let me go?

THE MOTHER. No, Tony. I'm an old woman, a stubborn old woman. I won't give up my son for something which has been a curse to me. These wars of yours have already cost me too much. You're not going. I won't let you.

TONY. But, Mother, you can't act like that. I'll run away. I'll run away from you.

THE MOTHER. [*Standing up*] Then wait. Look at me, Tony. Look at me.

TONY. Mother, please, I beg you——

THE MOTHER. Would you leave me here? Haven't you thought of what would happen to me? How could I live if you went away from me? You can't treat me like that, Tony. I have nobody but you now.

TONY. But nothing will happen to me, Mother. Don't be

THE MOTHER

afraid. Really and truly, Mother. I feel it, I know. I just can't imagine anything happening to me.

THE MOTHER. No, you can't imagine it, but I can, Tony. I can. All of you went off as if you were just going for a walk, and it was always: *Don't be afraid, Mother, I'll be back again with you soon.* I know, I know. You can't fool me.

TONY. I don't want to fool you, Mother. I know that . . . that . . . I might perhaps be killed. You know, I can just imagine what it's like. Ever since I made up my mind to go, I've been killed heaps of times. I can do it as easily as can be, and you'd be surprised how real it seems. Or sometimes I see the boys in our class lying on the ground, as if they'd all been killed, you know. A whole heap of them lying there and they've still got ink on their fingers. And it doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I don't feel frightened at all. That's a sign, you see, that I must go. As a matter of fact, I can't imagine myself not going. We agreed that it was the duty of all of us.

THE MOTHER. Tony, do you know what *your* duty is? To stay with me. You owe that to me . . . for your Dad . . . and your brothers. Surely I have a right to be considered, haven't I, Tony?

TONY. Yes, Mother, but now there's a bigger duty——

THE MOTHER. Bigger, bigger—I know I mean nothing to you now. Perhaps all of you looked upon me as something of no account. I know all about those big manly duties of yours, but you mustn't expect me to take them as seriously as you do. I'm too old for that. Thousands and thousands of years old, Tony.

TONY. Mother, if you won't let me go, then——

THE MOTHER. Then what? You won't love me any more, is that it? You'll hate me, won't you? You'll despise me and yourself, you'll struggle to get away. I'm sure you will, Tony. You can hate me if you like, but I'm going to keep you here. And when the war is over, you'll be the first to

THE MOTHER

say: Mother, you were right. [*Lays her hand on his shoulders*] Well, Tony, what is it to be?

TONY. [*Slipping away from her clasp*] Please, Mother, let me alone——

THE MOTHER. Very well, then. You can hate me, my dear boy. I've been through so much that I can bear even that. After all, love is also hard and cruel. Go, if you want to, Tony. Go, but if you do, you'll kill me. . . . Well, why don't you go?

TONY. Please, Mother, don't be angry with me. I don't know how to say it, but you can't help seeing that I must go like all the rest.

THE MOTHER. I cannot see anything, Tony. I never have seen anything except you, my children, my tiny children in your rompers. Perhaps I haven't got used to the idea that you've grown up. Let me see you, Tony. Come here. How big you are. Why, Tony, it's time you behaved like a grown-up man.

TONY. Yes, Mother, I must.

THE MOTHER. Well, then, it'd be wrong of you to leave your poor, crazy old mother to fret all by herself. You don't know what I'd do. I'd go into the streets and shout curses on this war and on those who are sending you into it.

TONY. Mother!

THE MOTHER. You mustn't make me do that, Tony. You must comfort your mother, and protect her. I have only you left now. I know what it means giving up something you've set your heart on, but a man must be able to make big sacrifices of that kind.

TONY. [*Biting his lips to keep back the tears*] Mother—you know, if you can't do without me—I really don't know——

THE MOTHER. [*Kissing him on the forehead*] Brave Tony. I knew that I could rely on you. You're level-headed and you're brave, too. Your dad would have been very proud of you. Now come along with me. We've got to get ready for this war.

THE MOTHER

[Leans on his shoulder and takes him out of the room. At the doorway she switches off the light. The room is now in darkness. She can be heard locking the door outside and removing the key.]

ANDREW'S VOICE. *[In the darkness]* Poor Mother!

THE FATHER'S VOICE. Poor Tony!

CHRISTOPHER'S VOICE. It must be pretty awful for him.

[A brief interval. Outside can be heard the noise of drums and soldiers marching.]

PETER'S VOICE. Do you hear that?

GEORGE'S VOICE. They're off to the front.

THE FATHER'S VOICE. They're swinging along in fine style. Left, right! Left, right! Left, right!

CHRISTOPHER'S VOICE. Yes, it makes you wish you could join in with them.

[A brief interval. The sound of the drums outside dies away.]

THE FATHER'S VOICE. I say, George, couldn't you get some news from the wireless? We ought to find out what's happening.

GEORGE'S VOICE. Yes, Dad.

[He switches the wireless on.]

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. *[Muffled]* . . . our eastern forces continue to withdraw amid heavy fighting; their right wing has halted under cover of a mountain ridge and is offering stubborn resistance to the enemy.

THE FATHER'S VOICE. I only hope to goodness our troops take care not to get outflanked.

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. . . . and seventeen enemy aeroplanes have been shot down. Nine of our planes failed to return.

GEORGE'S VOICE. Nine to seventeen; that isn't bad.

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The bombarding of our open towns continues. The number of civilians killed is estimated at eight thousand. We have no further information yet as to the fate of the town of Villamedia, which was attacked by enemy aircraft.

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER'S VOICE. Switch it off, George. Somebody's coming.

[*The click of the knob is heard. After a short silence, the key turns in the lock and THE MOTHER enters the room, which is still in darkness.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Locks the door after her, walks a few steps forward, and then stands still*] I know that you are here. What do you want of me?

THE FATHER'S VOICE. We've only come here to see you, darling.

THE MOTHER. Not to see me, Richard.

[*She lights the lamp on the writing-table and looks round. The following are sitting or standing in various parts of the room: THE OLD MAN, THE FATHER, ANDREW, GEORGE, CHRISTOPHER, and PETER.*]

CHRISTOPHER. Good evening, Mum.

THE FATHER. Darling, haven't you noticed . . .? Grandfather has come here as well.

THE OLD MAN. [*Sitting in an armchair; he is wearing old-fashioned clothes with ribbons on his chest*] Good evening, my dear.

THE MOTHER. What, you here, too, Dad? Why, I haven't seen you for ages.

THE OLD MAN: Well, here I am, my dear. And I haven't changed much, have I?

THE MOTHER. No, you haven't. But, Dad, why have you . . .? [*Looking from one to the other*] Why have you all met here like this? Are you holding a family council?

ANDREW. Oh no, Mother. We just wanted to be with you, now that you're living in such dangerous times as these.

THE MOTHER. Are you sure that's the truth, Andrew? As far as I know, you never used to spend much time with me. What have you just been talking about?

GEORGE. Nothing, Mother. We were only listening to the news on the wireless.

THE MOTHER. Fancy that! It seems so strange that you should be interested in things of that sort now.

THE MOTHER

PETER. Why, because we're dead? Oh, but we are very much interested in them. More so than you might suppose.

THE MOTHER. Still, you can't meddle with them now, thank goodness.

THE FATHER. Don't run away with that idea, darling. We can, more than you realize. When a war starts, we dead bestir ourselves.

CHRISTOPHER. You see, Mother, we're not quite so dead as you imagine.

PETER. Yes, and everything that happens affects us just as much as before. And as a matter of fact, we are the cause of it.

THE MOTHER. Yes, you are the cause of it, I know. And if you are the cause of this particular business, I can't say you have much to boast about.

THE FATHER. But, darling, the war isn't over yet. It may end in a brilliant victory for us. Reinforcements are what is needed. I'm a bit worried about that left wing. Darling, where did you put my staff maps?

THE MOTHER. [*Unlocks the writing-table*] Here they are. What do you want them for?

THE FATHER. There's a point I'd just like to verify. Thanks. [*Spreads the maps out on the table.*]

CHRISTOPHER. The worst of it is, Dad, that we haven't enough officers. There was an awful lot of them got killed in the civil war. We're only just beginning to realize what a clean sweep was made of them.

PETER. Yes, and you were responsible for that, Chris. *

CHRISTOPHER. No, we weren't, Peter. You were to blame. You with your lack of discipline, your riff-raff, your suicidal pacifism.

PETER. My dear fellow, what about you with your guns? They did the most mischief.

CHRISTOPHER. Nonsense. I suppose we ought to have looked on with folded arms while you ruined the country. A fine thing that would have been. Thank goodness we

were able to save at least the backbone of our army from your pernicious influence.

PETER. And we, thank goodness, managed at least to show the people how to fight.

CHRISTOPHER. But not to obey orders.

PETER. No, they'll never obey yours. Wait until the war's over and you'll see.

CHRISTOPHER. Anyway, when the war's over they won't have any time for your hair-brained social schemes.

PETER. Won't they indeed? That's the very thing they will have time for. And then we shall discover what use this war really is.

CHRISTOPHER. Look here, if anybody wins this war, it can only be the country as a whole. The country, strong, disciplined and self-reliant. That's why I thank God for this war. It's going to put a stop to all this idiotic chatter about a new and better world-order.

THE MOTHER. Boys, boys, haven't you stopped quarrelling yet? Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Peter and Chris, you both lost your lives on account of this very same thing. Haven't you had enough of it? What will your grandfather think of you?

THE OLD MAN. It's all very puzzling to me, my dear. But youth will have its fling, you know.

PETER. I'm sorry, Mother, but as long as our thoughts remain, and the issue for which we struggled is still undecided, we cannot take things calmly, even now that we are dead.

ANDREW. You see, Mother, we are all of us continuing our struggle for truth, for the country, for mankind, just like anyone else. We still want our cause to win. And we may yet lose, even now that we're dead.

THE FATHER. [*Bending over the staff map*] This line might be defended. By Jove, that would be a time-honoured manœuvre: the centre firmly established and a break through on the flank. And then we'd drive the rascals into the sea.

CHRISTOPHER. I'm not so sure of that, Dad. A break-

THE MOTHER

through would mean using an enormous number of troops.

THE FATHER. Of course, my boy, of course. But all of us would do our bit, wouldn't we?

THE MOTHER. What do you mean by "all of us," Richard?

THE FATHER. Why, everyone, darling. We as well.

THE MOTHER. A lot of good you'd be.

ANDREW. More than you think, Mother. The country needs the force of all its dead behind it.

THE MOTHER. Is that why you let so many get killed?

PETER. You see, Mother, this last struggle is one which affects us very closely. If the war is lost . . .

CHRISTOPHER. . . . it means that we all died for nothing. Then nothing would be left, Mother, nothing even of us who are dead.

THE MOTHER. Then you really all want to go?

GEORGE. We must, Mother. It's our duty. Dad would join his old regiment.

PETER. I'd be with the volunteers' brigade.

GEORGE. And I—well, I presume I'd stick to the flying corps.

THE FATHER. I only wish I could get Tony into my regiment.

THE MOTHER. Richard!

THE FATHER. It used to be a fine regiment, darling. A famous regiment. It always had more casualties than any other.

THE MOTHER. Then that is why you came here, is it? I thought as much. But I won't let you have Tony, do you hear? Tony can't go. He can't.

THE FATHER. That would be a great pity, my dear. I should feel terribly sorry for the boy.

ANDREW. Mother, you really must try to understand. There would always be a slur on Tony if he had to stay at home. Tony is so touchy. His conscience would never be at rest.

GEORGE. After all, he's the son of a major. His father died

THE MOTHER

heroically on the battle-field. Really, it would look most queer if he stayed behind. His honour is at stake.

CHRISTOPHER. We are fighting for our country, Mother. He simply must go. It's his bounden duty.

PETER. Mother, I also want to plead with you. Of course, I used to be opposed to war. In fact, I still am. But violence of this kind has got to be resisted, Mother. It's a matter of principle.

THE MOTHER. [*Looking round like a hunted animal*] You all want him to get killed, too, don't you? You have come to fetch him, haven't you? So you're all against me. All of you.

THE FATHER. But, darling, what we want to do isn't against you.

THE MOTHER. Yes it is! You've produced enough arguments to try and talk me over. Honour. Conscience. Principle. Duty. Is that all? Can't you think of anything else?

ANDREW. What do you mean, Mother?

THE MOTHER. You've forgotten to say: You don't understand, Mother. This is a man's business.

THE FATHER. You are right, Dolores. This is a man's business.

THE MOTHER. There you are! And I have turned it into a woman's business. A mother's business. I'm afraid, Richard, that we'll never understand each other. And with you, children, I shall always be at cross-purposes, too. It seems to me that we may as well stop discussing the matter.

GEORGE. But, Mother . . .

THE MOTHER. Let me be. And now get out of here. I'm sick of the sight of you.

[*Turns away. There is a brief interval. The dead look at each other in bewilderment.*]

ANDREW. Mother doesn't trust us . . .

THE MOTHER. I've got every reason not to trust you, Andrew.

ANDREW. I suppose we've set Tony a bad example. But perhaps grandfather might tell you . . .

THE MOTHER

THE OLD MAN. What, me?

[*They all turn towards the old man.*]

Good gracious, what am I to say? I've never been a soldier or a hero. Why, I can't even remember any wars.

THE MOTHER. Dad, would you send your last son to the firing-line?

THE OLD MAN. Well, my dear, you know we were old-fashioned sort of people in my day. You're different. You've got used to wars and all that sort of thing. Ten thousand, a hundred thousand dead don't mean a great deal to you. But we weren't like that. We looked upon war as if it was something in a story-book. Something that could never really happen to us.

THE MOTHER. But suppose it had happened, Dad, suppose it had happened.

THE OLD MAN. Oh, we never settled things at such short notice in my day. As for wars, we just used to read about them. We were taught that it was honourable for a man to die for his country. We may have been old-fashioned, my dear, but we took that for granted. So I suppose that's how I feel about it, too. If I was asked to die for my country, why, I'd do it, my dear. Yes, I'd do it.

THE MOTHER. I can quite believe it, Dad. But would you send your children to the firing-line?

THE OLD MAN. Ah, that's another matter. You mustn't confuse the issue like that. All I say is that if I were in Tony's place, I'd go. I'm an old man and I haven't been much of a hero, I suppose. Still, I didn't do so badly, did I? Quite a satisfactory career, I think. I was high up in the government service, with decorations and so on . . . Let me see, what was I talking about?

THE MOTHER. Would you send your children to their death?

THE OLD MAN. That's it. I remember now. Well, I lived what you might call a full life, never neglected my duty, and was highly thought of after my death. Yes, my

THE MOTHER

life was a happy one. But now and then, you know, I wonder if there was something I missed. That's the plain fact of the matter, my dear.

THE MOTHER. What do you mean? What has that got to do with Tony?

THE OLD MAN. Nothing, my dear, nothing. I just mentioned it to show you how strange life is. You know, when you were going to be born, your mother was very ill. In fact, we were told to be prepared for the worst. Well, I knelt down at her bedside, and I can still remember how ashamed I felt. I said to myself: Here is my wife, risking everything to bring a child into the world, and I'm quite helpless. What have I done? You see, that's what gives life its value. It has to be paid for and sometimes life itself is the price. And then that's a woman's business too, my dear. It's the same with everything else, you know. If men didn't lay down their lives for their country, and for honour and truth and so on, they wouldn't have the huge value that they have got. So let your son go. It's the right thing to do.

THE MOTHER. Is that all you can tell me, Dad?

THE OLD MAN. I'm not sure, my dear. You know, I only wish I could be of some help in this war. If I could at least send a grandson of mine to it . . . even only one, I should feel that I wasn't altogether quite dead and useless. There isn't much a dead old man like me can give . . .

THE MOTHER. Why, you've never even seen Tony? How can you say such things?

THE OLD MAN. No, I've never seen him, but he belongs to my family. He'd fight on our behalf. We're an old family with a fine record.

THE MOTHER. Tony isn't going!

THE OLD MAN. Just as you like, my dear. But it's a pity. We were a family with such a fine record.

[*A brief interval.*]

THE FATHER. Come, come, darling. Let the boy go.

THE MOTHER. Why, Richard, you don't know Tony,

THE MOTHER

either. You've never held him in your arms, you've never nursed him on your knee. If you knew how tiny he was when he was born, if you had seen his wee hands. You can't have any proper feeling for him, or you wouldn't talk like that. Tony can't go. He's not strong enough. You know him, Andrew. You're a doctor, and so you can tell them how delicate Tony has always been. Don't you remember how you used to prescribe tonics for him. You were a father to him, Andrew. Tell them that Tony isn't fit to go, please tell them.

[ANDREW *shrugs his shoulders and says nothing.*]

THE MOTHER. You won't back me up? Then you say something, George. You were keener on games than any of the others, and you know how you used to tease Tony for not wanting to play. You always said: Tony's no good, Tony's a milksop, Tony's a coward. Remember how you used to make fun of him. You must admit, George, that a nervous boy like Tony would never make a soldier. Can you imagine him in the firing-line?

[GEORGE *shrugs his shoulders and says nothing.*]

THE MOTHER. So you won't back me up, either? Then you say something, Chris; you say something, Peter. Both of you know how morbidly sensitive Tony is. He always turned as white as a sheet when the pair of you started fighting. And then he'd burst into tears. Do you remember how one day he saw a horse being ill-treated? He nearly fainted away. Chris, what use could he possibly be as a soldier? For heaven's sake, Peter, do say something. You two know him better than anyone else did.

CHRISTOPHER. Well, Mother, there's not much help for it, I'm afraid. They'll all have to go.

THE MOTHER. You don't like Tony, that's what it is. None of you like him.

THE FATHER. Yes, we do, darling, we do like him very much, only the boy will fret if he has to stay at home. It's for his own sake that we . . .

THE MOTHER. Well, let him fret, then. If he's that keen,

THE MOTHER

if it's such a sacrifice for him to stay with his Mother. . . .
Oh, now not even Tony has any affection for me.

ANDREW. Yes, he has, Mother. He's very fond of you indeed. We're all very fond of you.

THE MOTHER. Don't talk such nonsense, Andrew, don't talk such nonsense to me. Why, you don't even realize what it means to be fond of anyone. None of you. You were always busy with something else, something far more important than being fond of anyone. But I was different. I have never known anything more important. I can't imagine anything more important than that. Richard, I only wish you had seen Tony when he was a new-born baby. He was so fragile and dainty, with funny little wisps of hair. How can you think it possible for Tony to go and fight?

GEORGE. But, Mother, Tony is a big fellow now.

THE MOTHER. He may seem so to you, but not to me. That only shows how little you understand. Can't you realize that Tony is the baby to whom I gave birth, whom I tended and nursed, whom I taught to talk, holding his little hand in mine? Good heavens, have you all gone mad? How do you think I can let a baby like that leave home?

CHRISTOPHER. You had to let us leave home, Mother.

THE MOTHER. No, that's not true. I didn't let you. You always had a kind of private world where I couldn't follow you, a place where you played at being grown up. Do you suppose that I ever regarded you as grown up? Do you imagine that you were ever heroes in my eyes? No, to me you were just silly little children who'd had the bad luck to get killed. As for you, Richard, do you know how I regarded you? As the man who slept at my side, and whom I knew to be mine. And this knowledge filled me, body and soul, with utter happiness. Suddenly he was taken away from me and murdered in some distant place. Can't you realize how preposterous that was? What do you suppose I cared about some useless strip of land in Africa? And yet I had to sacrifice to it the man who was mine . . .

THE MOTHER

THE FATHER. That's a long time ago now, darling.

THE MOTHER. No, it isn't, Richard. Not for me it isn't. For me, all these things are part of to-day's happenings. And then there's you, Andrew. For me you are still the sulky little boy who was so terribly anxious to appear very wise for his age. And I still stroll with you in the garden, with my arm on your shoulder as if you were helping me along. And you, George, I wonder how many dozens of times I mended your trousers. You had a mania for climbing trees. Do you remember how every evening I used to rub embrocation into your scratches and bruises? *It doesn't hurt, Mum*, you always said, *it's nothing*. And then you, Chris . . .

CHRISTOPHER. What's the point of all this, Mother? These are such trivial matters.

THE MOTHER. What's the point of it? Why, you're the one who doesn't understand. You see, every single one of what you call these trivial matters is, even now, far more important to me than all your colonial expeditions and wars. And do you know why? Because these trivial matters are all that I know you by. They were the only things in which I could be useful to you. That was my world. As soon as you got big ideas into your heads, you slipped away from me. And then you couldn't look me straight in the face, as if you had a bad conscience. *You don't understand, Mother*. Now you've got the same shifty eyes again, all of you. I know you're hatching some plan again, something of your own, something big.

ANDREW. You mustn't be angry, Mother, but this time it really is something very serious . . .

THE MOTHER. I don't want to know, Andrew. If it concerns Tony, I don't want to know about it. You have your reasons and I have mine. I realize that you've got obligations of your own, your honour, your country and goodness knows what else . . .

THE FATHER. Our duty, Mother.

THE MOTHER. Yes, your duty. I also had a duty, and

THE MOTHER

that was you. I had my honour, and that was you. Everything I had was you, you and only you. Now perhaps you'll explain to me why it is that I, of all people, I and never anyone else, I, for all these years, I a mother, I a woman, have to pay such an appalling price for your great achievements.

THE OLD MAN. You mustn't be angry with them, my dear.

THE MOTHER. I'm not angry with them, Dad. I'm angry with the world. My children are always being sent to their death in some great cause, for glory or salvation or whatever it is. And has it made the world any better? Was it really of any use at all?

THE OLD MAN. Yes, my dear, it was. It has produced a fine tradition, and that's a most necessary thing, you know.

THE FATHER. I know, darling, that it has been very hard on you. But when I look at you now . . .

THE MOTHER. Don't look at me, Richard, don't look at me, children. I'm an awful sight when I'm angry.

THE FATHER. You're so quick-tempered, you know. You yourself wouldn't shirk death if it had to be.

THE MOTHER. But it would have to be for you, and for nothing else. For my husband, for my family, for my children. I'm a woman, and what else could possibly matter to me? No, no, no, I won't let you have Tony.

[A brief interval.]

ANDREW. You know, Dad, in a way she's right. Tony really is a bit of a weakling. He's weedy and undersized.

GEORGE. It's his character that's the weakest part of him, Andrew. He's very excitable and at the same time he's as funky as can be. I've never seen anyone of his age so utterly devoid of pluck.

CHRISTOPHER. He can't help that, George. It's his nerves. Tony's got plenty of ability, but he's shockingly nervous. It makes me wonder what's to become of him.

PETER. It's an awful pity. At this rate he'll never be fit for anything.

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. You mustn't talk like that. You're being unfair to him. Richard, don't take any notice of them. They never did him justice. Tony is too sensitive, that's all. But apart from that, the care I've taken of him has done him lots of good. You'd be delighted to see how strong and well he is now. And as a matter of fact, he himself wanted to volunteer for the army. He begged and prayed of me to let him go. But I wouldn't let him. And I won't let him. So he's not to blame.

THE FATHER. And why won't you let him go, Dolores?

THE MOTHER. Because I don't want to be left by myself. It may be selfish of me, but, after all, Tony's the only one I've got, Richard. Please let me keep him. If he went, I should have nothing to live for, nothing at all. Let him stay with me, please do this for my sake, for the sake of your mother. She's so upset and so tired. Please, please admit that I don't need to let Tony go. Say that you agree. Can't you hear me? [A brief interval.]

THE OLD MAN. My goodness me, this is most awkward. You mustn't excite yourself so, my dear. The boy may not have to go, after all. It may be too late now. Perhaps we've already lost the war.

THE FATHER. [*Bending over the map*] Not yet, Dad. This line could still be held, if all the available reinforcements were brought up.

PETER. I'm certain we can rely upon the people. They're armed and they'll use their rifles in the streets. You'll see, even the children will do their bit. They'll take the rifles that belonged to their fathers.

CHRISTOPHER. [*Looking round*] Mother, where did you put the weapons that used to be here?

THE MOTHER. What do you say, my darling?

CHRISTOPHER. What have you done with the swords and things that belonged to dad?

THE MOTHER. I've hidden them away, so that Tony can't find them.

THE MOTHER

CHRISTOPHER. That's a pity. One of those carbines needed oiling.

GEORGE. [*Opens a drawer of the writing-table and takes out his old notebook, the pages of which he turns over*] It's a pity I couldn't finish that design I was working at. It was a first-rate idea. [*Sits down with the notebook.*]

THE FATHER. [*Engrossed in the map*] Now this position here is one that I myself would like to defend. It's a mountain-pass which offers wonderful possibilities.

CHRISTOPHER. I say, Mother, where did you put that carbine?

THE MOTHER. How fussy you are. [*Unlocks the oak cabinet*] Here it is.

CHRISTOPHER. Thanks. [*Takes the carbine out and inspects it*] It'll be all right when I've cleaned it up a bit.

[*Begins to clean it on the table with tow and oil.*]

[*A brief interval.*]

THE OLD MAN. Well, my dear, now you've got nearly the whole family together.

PETER. Did you hear that?

GEORGE. What?

PETER. That silence.

ANDREW. Yes, it's just as if someone was about to make a speech.

PETER. Who? [*They look at each other and then turn to the wireless set*] Ah, I know.

THE FATHER. [*Raising his head*] What's the matter.

[*Looks anxiously towards the loud-speaker.*]

[*A brief silence.*]

THE MOTHER. I suppose you want to listen to it. There's nothing else that interests you now. Only war.

[*Switches the wireless on.*]

CHRISTOPHER. When there's a war on, Mother, war's the only thing that counts.

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. . . . and the advance guard is approaching the river. The volunteer

THE MOTHER

detachments have blown up the bridges and are prepared to defend the bridge-head to the last man. The enemy must be held back at any cost. The volunteers are sending you this message. We shall die but we shall not retreat.

WOMAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. We are calling all men to arms. We are calling all men. We are of no further account. We are no longer fighting for ourselves, but for the land of our fathers and children. In the name of the dead and the unborn we call the whole nation to arms.

THE MOTHER. No, Tony shan't go. I won't let him.

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The commander-in-chief of the northern army reports further rearguard hostilities. Every inch of soil, every hedge, every cottage are being fought for. The people in the villages have refused to evacuate their homes, and are defending themselves by force of arms. The enemy is compelled to raze every village and solitary dwelling to the ground. The casualties have been exceptionally severe.

ANDREW. How I pity those poor wretches!

THE FATHER. Never mind them. Those are the right tactics. That'll hold up the enemy's advance.

WOMAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. A wireless message is just being transmitted to us from the training-ship *Gorgon*. Listeners are asked to stand by for a moment while it is decoded. The *Gorgon*. . . Oh, my God! [*She breaks down*] I beg the indulgence of listeners. I have a son on board. [*A brief silence*] The *Gorgon* with four hundred naval cadets on board endeavoured to break through the enemy's blockade and return to its harbour. At seven minutes past five it was struck by an enemy torpedo. The vessel is floundering. [*A sigh*] The cadets on board the *Gorgon* are sending their last message home. They appeal for . . . our national anthem . . . to be played to them . . . for the last time. My son. My boy.

THE MOTHER. What's that? So you've got a son too? You've also got a child?

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. That concludes

THE MOTHER

the transmission of news. We are calling the training-ship *Gorgon*. We are calling the *Gorgon*. Hallo, hallo. Can you hear us? Cadets of the *Gorgon*, listen carefully. Cadets on board the *Gorgon*, your country sends you a last greeting.

[*The national anthem is heard from the loud-speaker. All the dead silently rise and stand at attention.*]

THE MOTHER. Four hundred boys! How can the slaughter of such young lads be allowed?

PETER. Please, Mother, don't talk now.

[*They all stand quite rigidly. The anthem comes to an end.*]

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. There is no further message from the training-ship *Gorgon*.

CHRISTOPHER. Good-bye, cadets.

[*Hangs the rifle on the wall.*]

WOMAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. We call all men. We call the nation to battle. The country calls its children. To arms! To arms!

THE MOTHER. What, are you still shouting? You're not satisfied yet, although you're a mother. You're sending others there?

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The commander-in-chief of the western sector reports: On the whole front we are fighting against vastly superior numbers. The fighting on both sides is becoming extremely desperate. Our airmen report the approach of fresh enemy divisions.

[*A banging at the door.*]

TONY'S VOICE. Mother, Mother.

THE MOTHER. [*Switching the wireless off*] Quiet.

[*A banging at the door.*]

TONY'S VOICE. Mother, are you there?

THE MOTHER. Yes, my dear boy. [*Makes a sign that someone should switch off the light*] I'm coming.

[*Darkness. A brief silence.*]

THE MOTHER. [*Unlocks the door*] What do you want here, Tony?

TONY. Are you in the dark here?

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER. Switch the light on.

TONY. [*Lights the chandelier from the switch by the door. The room is empty but the staff maps are still spread out on the table*] Mother, whom were you talking to here?

THE MOTHER. Nobody, dear.

TONY. But I heard voices here . . .

THE MOTHER. That was only . . . the wireless.

[*Switches it on again.*]

TONY. And what have you put these maps here for?

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. The General Staff Headquarters report: The town of Villamedia was destroyed by an enemy air-raid early this morning. More than eight hundred civilians, mostly women and children, lost their lives. Our ancient castle, so rich in historical memories which we cherished, has been burnt down.

TONY. Do you hear that, Mother?

MAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. An aerial bomb hit the hospital, where sixty patients perished. The town of Villamedia is in flames.

TONY. Mother, please . . .

WOMAN'S VOICE FROM THE LOUD-SPEAKER. We appeal to the whole world. We appeal to humanity. This morning enemy aircraft attacked the village of Borgo and dropped bombs on the village school. The children who attempted to escape were mown down by machine-guns. Eighty children were wounded. Nineteen children were shot dead. Thirty children were blown to pieces.

THE MOTHER. What's that you say? Children? Are they killing children?

TONY. [*Searching the map*] Where is it? Where is it?

THE MOTHER. [*Standing as if turned to stone*] Children! Children like my own used to be! Children with untidy hair and dirty faces.

THE MOTHER. [*Snatches the rifle from the wall and thrusts it into TONY's outstretched hands. With a sweeping movement of her arms*] Go!

[CURTAIN.]

